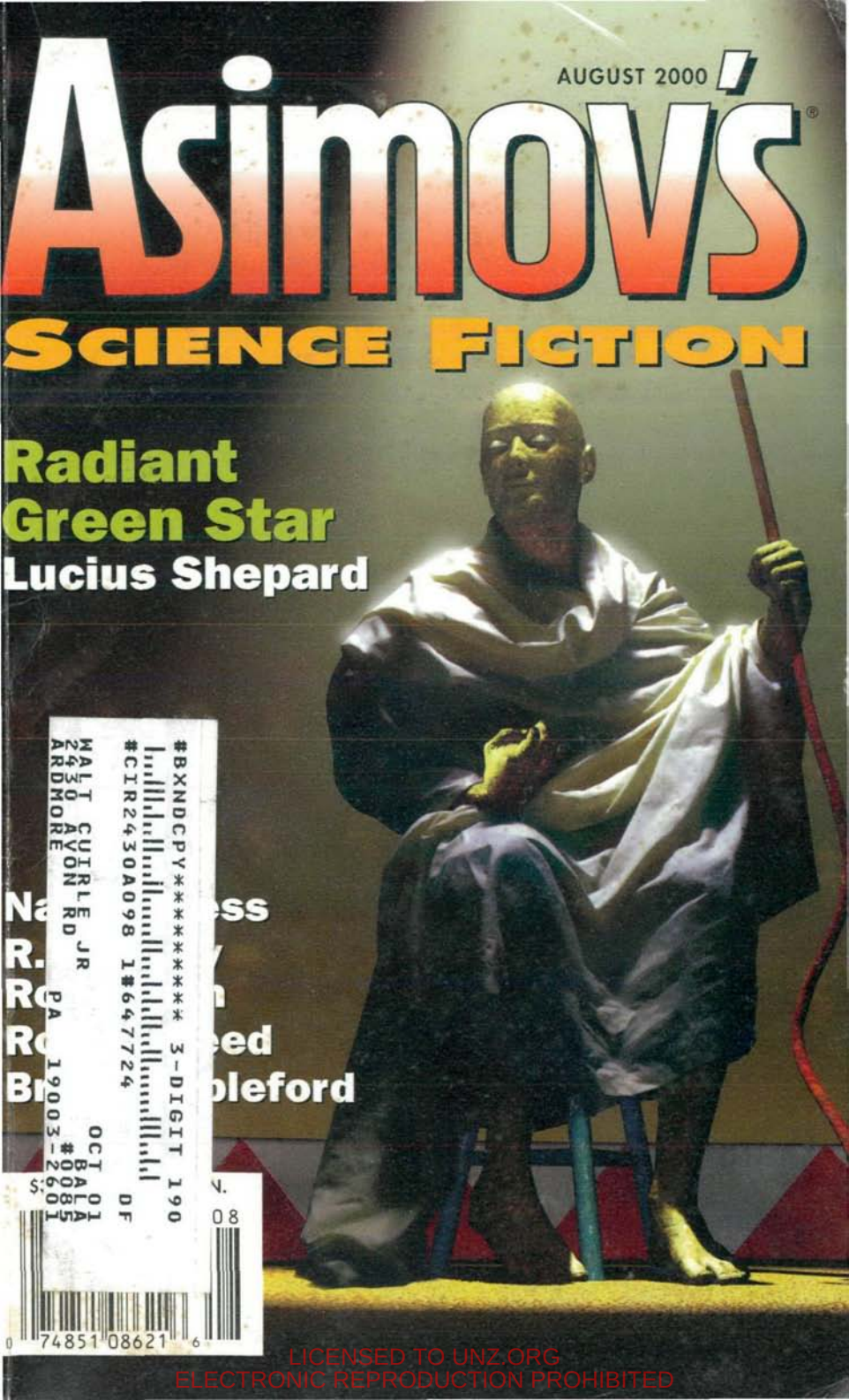
AUGUST 2000

Asimov's
Science Fiction

Radiant Green Star
Lucius Shepard

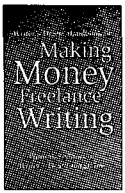


Na ess
R.
R n
R ed
Br bleford

#BXNDCPY********** 3-DIGIT 190
#CIR2430A098 1#6647724 DF
WALT CUIRLE JR
2430 AVON RD
ARDMORE PA 19003-2601
OCT 01 BALA
#00085
$. 08
0 74851 08621 6

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Discover the Secrets of Fiction Writing that Sells!



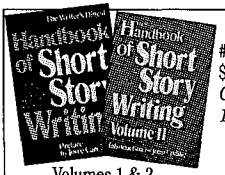
#10501 $19.99

#10518 $14.99

#10464 $22.99

#48041 $18.99

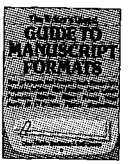
#43162 $33.98 *Counts as 1 selection.*



Volumes 1 & 2

#43057
$27.98 pbs
Counts as 1 selection.

#10366 $17.99

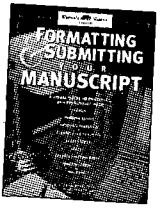


#10025 $19.99

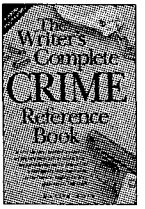
#10532 $17.99

#10541 $19.99

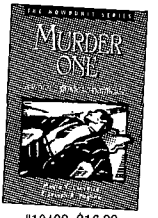
#10567 $17.99



#10618 $18.99

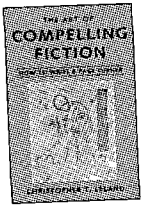


#10371 $19.99

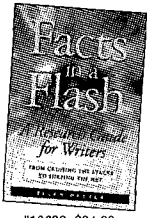


#10498 $16.99

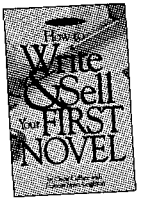
#10500 $22.99



#48030 $17.99

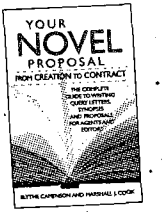


#10632 $24.99



#10530 $16.99

#10631 $18.99



#10628 $18.99

AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

- **DISCOUNTS FROM 15-65%** on every book you buy!
- **FREE SHIPPING AND HANDLING** on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- **SATISFACTION GUARANTEED 100%!**

HOW THE CLUB WORKS

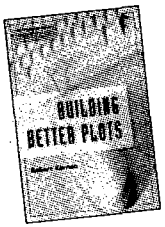
You'll receive the *BULLETIN* every four weeks (fourteen times a year) featuring the Main Selection and 100 or more of the newest and best books for writers. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing. We will send it to you automatically. If you want a different book or want nothing that month, just indicate your choice on the easy-to-use Selection Card and mail it to us. You'll always have at least 10 days to decide and return your Selection Card. However, if late mail delivery ever causes you to receive a book you don't want, you may return it at Club expense. As a new member, you are under no obligation to buy any more books—you're just trying out the Club for 9 months. After that, you may cancel at any time. Every time you buy a book from the *BULLETIN*, your membership will be renewed for 6 months from the purchase date.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

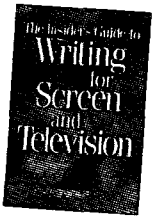
TAKE 2 BOOKS

FREE*

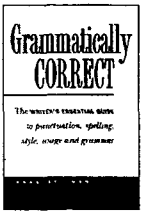
WITH A 3RD FOR JUST $11.99 WHEN YOU JOIN WRITER'S DIGEST BOOK CLUB!



10602 $18.99



#10483 $17.99



#10529 $19.99

#10630 $16.99

#10553 $18.99

MEMBERSHIP SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

☐ **YES!** I want to join Writer's Digest Book Club. Please sign me up and send me:

My first FREE book #_____	**FREE**
and my second FREE book #_____	**FREE**
with my third book #_____ for only	$ 11.99
*plus shipping and handling	$ 6.53
all for just	$ 18.52

(Payment in U.S. funds must accompany order. In Ohio add 72¢ tax. In Canada, please provide a street address and enclose $8.93 for shipping and handling plus $1.46 for GST for a total of $22.38.)

☐ Check enclosed or Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct # ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ Exp. Date: _____

I have read How The Club Works and understand I have no obligation to buy any more books.

Signature_____
required on all certificates

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State/Prov. _____ ZIP/PC_____

Writer's Digest BOOK CLUB

Limited time offer good for new members in the U.S. and Canada only. Please allow 3-4 weeks for delivery. All applications subject to approval.

AS74

P.O. Box 12948 Cincinnati, Ohio 45212-0948

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vol. 24 No. 8
(Whole Number 295)
August 2000

Next Issue on Sale
August 8, 2000

12

76

Cover illustration by
Fred Gambino

www.asimovs.com

Asimov's Science Fiction

Novellas

12 One-Eyed Jacks and Suicide Kings — R. Garcia y Robertson

90 Radiant Green Star — Lucius Shepard

Short Stories

50 When It Ends — Robert Reed

59 To Cuddle Amy — Nancy Kress

62 The Ladykiller, As Observed From a Safe Distance — Brian Stableford

76 The Wurst King vs Aluminum Foil Boy — R. Neube

Poetry

75 Background Music — Steven Utley

131 Dying Live on CNN — Joe Haldeman

Departments

4 Guest Reflections: Science Fiction Is Easy, Life Is Hard — Karen Haber

8 On the Net: Expertise — James Patrick Kelly

132 On Books — Paul Di Filippo

142 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Gardner Dozois: Editor
Sheila Williams: Executive Editor
Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977-1992)
Peter Kanter: Publisher
Christine Begley: Associate Publisher

Stories from Asimov's have won thirty-five Hugos and twenty-four Nebula Awards, and our editors have received fourteen Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 1999 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's Science Fiction (USPS 522-310). Published monthly except for a combined October/November double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription $39.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $47.97 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, Box 54033, Boulder, CO 80322-4033. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2000 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub Dept, 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. ISSN 1065-2698. GST #R123293128

Printed in CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

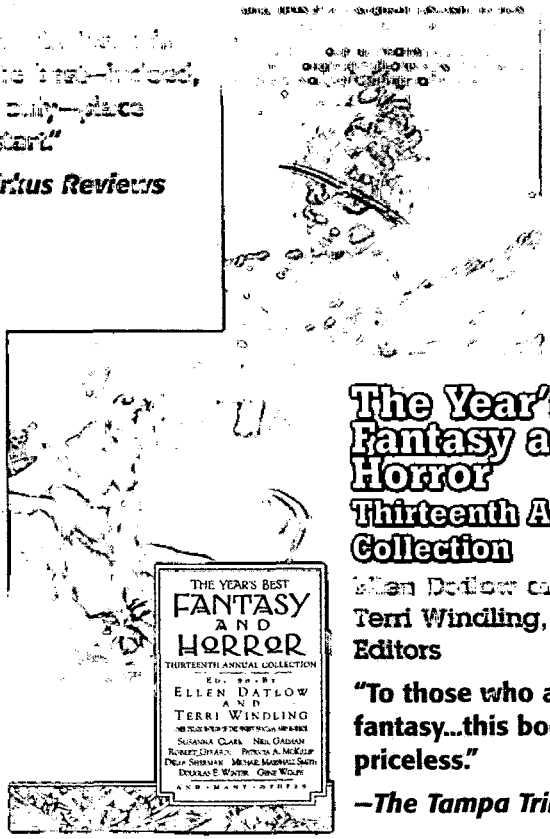
Stories they'll be reading in Y3K...

The Year's Best Science Fiction
Seventeenth Annual Collection

G.
E.

THE YEAR'S BEST

"...the best-loved, ...place start."
Kirkus Reviews



The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror
Thirteenth Annual Collection

Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, Editors

"To those who appreciate fantasy...this book is priceless."
—The Tampa Tribune

Both anthologies are available in trade paperback and clothbound editions, wherever books are sold.

St. Martin's Griffin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GUEST REFLECTIONS by Karen Haber

SCIENCE FICTION IS EASY, LIFE IS HARD

[*Robert Silverberg has gone off to Majipoor to do research for his new novel,* The King of Dreams. *Filling in for him as guest columnist this month is Karen Haber, author of* The Mutant Season, Woman Without a Shadow, *and many other novels, who in what passes for reality in early 2000 is Mrs. Robert Silverberg.*]

You can't accuse me of living in the past. In fact, that's the last thing I do. Most of my time is spent in the future. As a science fiction writer, and the spouse of one, I have no choice. Besides, it's not a bad place to visit.

One of the charms of being a science fiction writer is that I can time travel at will anywhere I like. And if the environment doesn't suit me, I can change it.

For example, if the locals are rude and surly I can redesign them any way I please—give them writhing tentacles instead of limbs, say, or mouths where their eyes used to be. Make them breathe methane and see how they like it. Put their brains where their buttocks would be, and vice versa. Give them acne on their antennae.

Or, if a small inland sea is dark, briny, and filled with yucky phosphorescent water spiders when I prefer cool, pure mountain water and sweet little pink fire fish, I can take care of that, too. The mere work of a moment—zap! And the job is done.

To be blunt, being a science fiction writer is not unlike being the ruler of a small country or a televangelist. Even better, really. Godlike.

Yes, I know how it feels to be the creator of worlds. And I enjoy visiting most of the places I create. It's the return trip—and the concurrent reality lag—that gets to me.

For example, in the here and now, as I type, my antediluvian 486 PC clone is hiccuping and moving v-e-r-y-s-l-o-w-l-y. . . .

. . . and now I'm finishing this editorial on my nice new computer. That is, I'm using my nice new computer after it crashed on setup and was worked on by the kind, sensitive, patient tech—my new best friend—for several days.

But in the thirtieth century, all computers will be perfect. I think we can all agree on that fact. Yes, in the thirtieth century, computers will never crash. There will be no need for computer techs and hence, no voice-mail or hold buttons for voice-mail because our computers—like our lives—will be perfect.

All of our computer equipment will be carried in small implants behind our foreheads. We will have memo screens affixed like permanent contact lenses in front of our retinas to ensure that we never miss an important date or appointment.

Just think: no more forgotten meetings, birthdays, or anniversaries, no more fumbling excuses. In the thirtieth century there will never be any fumbling whatsoever—because we will all be graceful and perfect—and no need for excuses because nothing will ever go wrong. Publishers will always return agents' calls. We will always remember to pick up a quart of milk on the way home. Always get our manuscripts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in on time. Never forget a name or a face unless we want to.

Oh, it will all be so great. Our computers will turn out flawless prose by the yard—the meter, I suppose I should say—and they'll be equipped with not just the thirtieth century equivalents of spell-check but with plot-check and cliché-check as well. In fact, in the future, the computers will do all the work while we take in the 4-D Festival on Club Mars.

That's right. The escape function on your keyboard, if you still have a keyboard, will literally practice what it preaches. A small glowing door will open in the middle of the air, you'll tell it where you want to go, and step through. Presto, and there you are: wherever. On the beach at Maui. Snowboarding on Europa's ammonia ice. Sipping champagne on a hoverboat on the Seine. Couldn't be easier.

Did I mention that there will be no disease? Yes, no colds, no cancer, and no injections of any kind. No excess body fat, unless you want it. No blisters. No mosquito bites.

Just imagine: each one of us will have a personal shopping channel *and* shopping android. Computers will have spam force-fields to defend against unwanted e-mail. Automatic coffeemakers will be interactive, and will fix breakfast for us as well. Bathrooms will clean themselves. Cats will empty their own boxes and give you no lip about it.

Hostile behavior in editors, children, and other drivers will be short-circuited by behavior-mod implants. In the thirtieth century we will have Peace. Prosperity. Golden eyes. Antigravity clothing. Multi-book contracts.

But back here in the year 2000, I have just three days left to get my car a smog check if I'd like to continue driving it, legally. My new computer ate my index. One of the cats is sick. While Bob and I were in Aus-

GARDNER DOZOIS
Editor

SHEILA WILLIAMS
Executive Editor

LEAH MARCUS
Editorial Assistant

TREVOR QUACHRI
Technical Assistant

VALERIE RODRIGUEZ
Editorial Assistant

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

JUNE LEVINE
Assistant Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Senior Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

SCOTT LAIS
Contracts & Permissions

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Vice President of Sales and Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

PETER KANTER
Publisher

CHRISTINE BEGLEY
Associate Publisher

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director, Art and Production

ISAAC ASIMOV
Editorial Director
(1977-1992)

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
David Geller Publishers' Rep. (212) 455-0100

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

www.asimovs.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tralia this summer the garden staged a successful guerrilla action against the house, putting forth what looked like six months' growth in three weeks. All the windows need washing and reputtying. Our twenty-year-old washing machine is doing the lambada across the basement floor. And the raccoons living in our chimney keep late hours. *Extremely* late hours.

In the thirtieth century we will have seamless, leakless houses that, like flowers, will follow the sun on its daily journey. We will control the weather and there will be no droughts or hurricanes or other such disagreeable climatic disturbances. Plants will water themselves, lawns will never need weeding or cutting, the shrubbery will grow to its proper size and stay there forever without outside interference. (Where do you think my husband got the idea for the self-pruning gardens of Majipoor?)

Wait. There's more. Windows will repel dirt. Clothing will as well. There won't even *be* chimneys. All raccoons will be in bed by six o'clock each evening.

Pets will walk and feed themselves. Cats will live exactly as long as their owners do but—don't worry—will never, ever learn how to speak English.

The late William Rotsler, writer, filmmaker, and artist extraordinaire, once warned a bunch of uncouth and probably illiterate individuals that if they weren't careful he would change their futures for them. That's another perk of this job.

You see, you've got your basic utopia and your basic dystopia. I'm a fan of the former. Not for me the dark visions of cyber-enhanced gangsters and their android molls roaming mean neon-lit streets, slurping udon and sticking virtual ice picks through people's virtual ears.

In my opinion, dystopia is where you keep your modern nuisances: large corporate coffee chains with green circular logos that move in next door to mom-and-pop cafes, people who drive SUVs and talk loudly on cell phones (although not necessarily at the same time), Hollywood, heads of state with silky southern accents, murderous religious fanatics who persecute women and harbor terrorists, Dan Rather, ads for clothing or computers that feature Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and/or Humphrey Bogart, societies that fail to care for their needy, the NRA, the *Brady Bunch*, countries that stockpile supplies for waging germ warfare, Barbara Walters, and anybody else who contributed to making the end of the twentieth century the real slice that it was. (If ever a century could have used a good copy editor . . .)

Not for me, either, your mixed-topia: give me no dystopia-lite (see late-twentieth-century, above) nor any half-caff, nonfat mocha-with-no-foam utopia, either. I believe in a fully-caffeinated future, thank you. And yes, there will be chocolate. Twenty-four, seven. Guaranteed.

In the thirtieth century we will all drink double-lattes or mochas, *with* whipped cream, and we'll sleep like babies. Insomnia will be outlawed. Anybody in a bad mood will receive immediate government compensation. No one will know the meaning of terms like "ethnic cleansing," "ergonomic," or "permanent fatal error message." Writers will get paid first and will be exempt from all taxes and anxiety. Best of all, in the thirtieth century, all the critics will be dead or in jail.

I guess I've got a bad case of future envy. It's an occupational hazard, for a science fiction writer. But I've been there. Trust me. I've seen the future—hell, I've written about it and edited it ad nauseam—and believe me, it's swell. ○

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nobody does it better than Niven and Pournelle."—TOM CLANCY

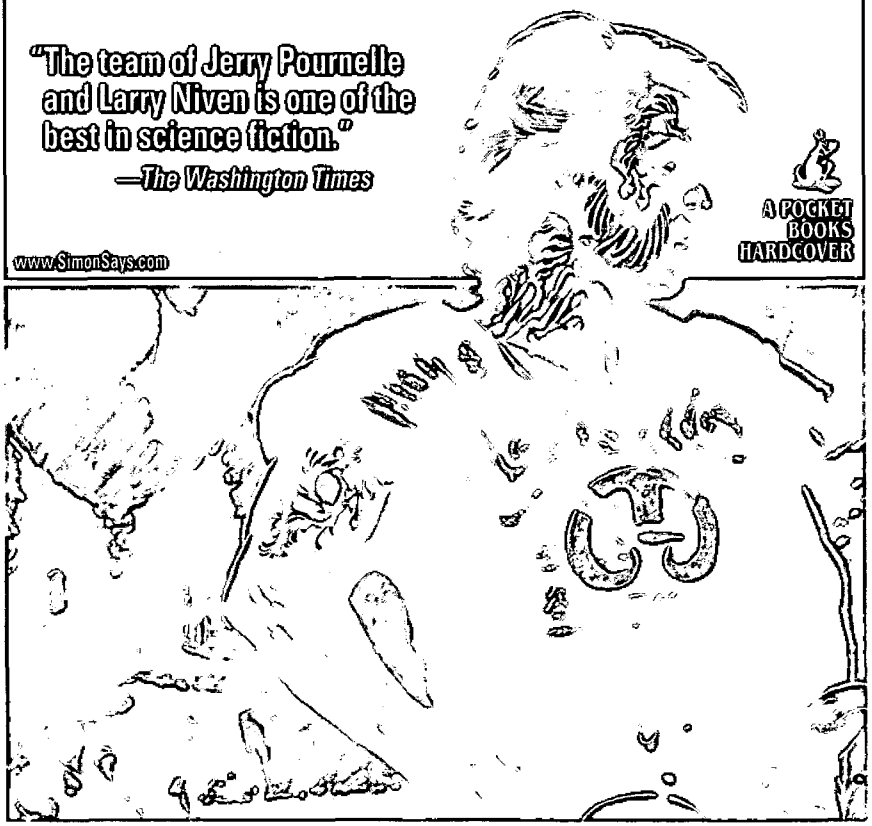
#1 *New York Times* bestselling authors of *Footfall*

LARRY NIVEN JERRY POURNELLE

THE BURNING CITY

Combining their award-winning talents and imaginations, Niven and Pournelle have produced a unique and powerful coming-of-age story—a masterpiece of epic fiction.

"The team of Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven is one of the best in science fiction."
—*The Washington Times*



A POCKET BOOKS HARDCOVER

www.SimonSays.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

EXPERTISE

Who Knew?

As I began to write this column, a breaking news story shocked the sleepy genre of science fiction. The evil suits who owned *Science Fiction Age* decided to shut it down after eight-some years and forty-six issues. While the passing of *Asimov's* worthy competitor was a blow to the field, it did not immediately suggest itself as something I should bring up here. As far as I could tell, *Science Fiction Age* had no significant presence on the web. But what made it a net story was that I first heard the news in an email from a listserv. My first impulse was to dismiss it as one of those rumors so common to the web. How many times have you received a breathless forward from a pal informing you that the next full moon will be the brightest since the invention of cheese? Or a dire warning about the alphabet virus that will make your keyboard explode, thereby tattooing *asdf jkl;* permanently on your forehead? One reason to think this was an unfounded rumor was that I had just read in the print version of *Locus* that Scott Edelman, *Science Fiction Age's* astute editor, had recently been given a big promotion, presumably for a job well done. But as my inbox filled with ever more obituary email, I decided to turn to the web to see if I could find out what was really going on. My first thought was to check those usually reliable genre news sources **Locus Online** <*http://www.locusmag.com*> and **Scifi Wire** <*http://www.scifi.com/scifiwire/*>, but neither had the story. On to the news page of **Science Fiction Writers of America** <*http://www.sfwa.org*>. Nothing. Okay then, where was this story coming from? I had a hunch, but before I tell you about it, let's digress, shall we?

On the boards

When I first crawled on line at 300 baud, before there was a World Wide Web, there was a magical cyberplace called Genie. Genie was a bulletin board—no, strike that—Genie was *the* bulletin board for science fiction, although it also served other interests. You see, an astonishingly large percentage of then-publishing science fiction writers hung out on Genie's Science Fiction Round Tables, which were free to members of SFWA. We'd waste scads of precious writing time every day offering one another advice, cracking jokes, gossiping, scratching each other's backs, writing reviews, worrying about the field, arguing to the point of inflammation and, in general, just being ourselves. Genie was divided into topics; the most popular centered on individual writers, the others on issues or interests, like short fiction, horror, conventions, markets, space exploration, and the like. Genie was all text, but what it lacked in graphics, it made up for in pungency. Alas, it was too good to last. A change in policy caused about a third of the free-flagged writers to log off and seek their digital kicks on the then-burgeoning World Wide Web. Genie lost its cachet. Nevertheless, it stag-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

www.turnmire.com
ERIC M. TURNMIRE ONLINE ART GALLERY
"Artists with Notable Works in Magazines..."
"Recommended Artists with Works in Small Press..."
From 1997 & 1998 The Years Best Fantasy & Horror
Edited by: Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling

gered on, bleeding members, until late last year.

By that time, the real SF bulletin board action moved to two websites: **Dueling Modems** <*http://www.dm.net/*> and **SFF Net** <*http://www.sff.net/*>. Both continue the Genie tradition of author and interest oriented topics, called newsgroups on SFF Net, discussion groups on Dueling Modems. The pertinent forum for SF readers on Dueling Modems is still the **Science Fiction Round Table** <*http://sfrt.com/*>. There are a lot of good people and lively posts on the SFRT, the most direct descendant of the late, great Genie. Its downside is that you have to pay to peek, although Dueling Modems will give you a free thirty day test drive. In an early installment of this column, I believe I called SFF Net the best science fiction site on the web, and I see no reason now to change my mind. SFF Net is humongous, and is itself host to several other important sites, such as **The Locus Index to Science Fiction** <*http://www.sff.net/locus*>, **The Horror Writers Association** <*http://www.horror.org/*>, SFWA's website, and **Basement Full of Books** <*http://www.sff.net/bfob/*>, to name just four. The gateway to the newsgroups on SFF Net is **Webnews** <*http://webnews.sff.net/*>. It doesn't cost anything to visit most of the newsgroups on SFF Net, but it does cost to get full access. I believe that there may be more writers on SFF Net than Dueling Modems, but then if you want to track a specific writer down, you've got to go where she is, no?

According to **Keith Stokes** <*http://home.unicom.net/~sfreader/*>, "I've been on SFF Net for several years and on DM for only two or three months. I find them similar, but there is much more activity at SFF Net. They fill the same 'community' role that Genie filled. SFF Net is active enough that I have had to reduce newsgroups and change my pattern of reading to keep it from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

taking too much of my time." **Deryl Murphy** <*http://www.sff.net/people/dmurphy/*> agrees. "I've just started poking around Dueling Modems. SFF Net is relatively useful, keeps me in contact with people, gives me the news I mostly need, and very successfully keeps me from getting work done."

Enough digression. So anyway, there I was trying to track down the truth behind the reported demise of *Science Fiction Age*. I happened to know that our own Gardner Dozois, who knows and sees all, had an active discussion group going on Dueling Modems. So I popped over to it to see if he had any news. Sure enough, he had posted a brief note saying that *Age* was dead, but at that point he wasn't offering details. Then it occurred to me that maybe Scott Edelman had a discussion group I could look at. He wasn't on DM but when I clicked over to SFF Net—*bingo!* He had posted the whole sad tale in his newsgroup. I can't say whether the news began to spread from these bulletin boards, but I do know that the story was there for all to see before any of the traditional genre news sources picked it up. Just for kicks, I continued to monitor all the three to see when they would run the *Science Fiction Age* story. SFWA News won this particular horse race with a terse three sentence announcement the day after the story broke on the bulletin boards. Locus Online placed, Scifi Wire showed.

And the answer is

SFF Net's Webnews and Dueling Modems offer the greatest concentration of science fiction expertise you can find anywhere. So what if the experts disagree sometimes and may start calling each other names? In the last few months, several ask-an-expert websites have debuted that are not limited in scope to genre doings, but aspire to provide the right answer to any question you might have. At **Askme.com** <*http://www.askme.com*>, "It's questions. It's answers. It's real people giving advice, for free." (It's also bad grammar, but let that pass.) At **Exp.com** <*http://www.exp.com*> you can get, "The Expert Experience." **KnowPost** <*http://www.knowpost.com/*> is, "The Knowledge Commons. It's a marketplace where ideas and information are exchanged freely." And at **ExpertCentral** <*http://www.expertcentral.com/*> "The search is over."

I have clicked all of these sites, and I have to admit that I don't know quite what to think of them. Yes, they offer us a glimpse of the future of the knowledge economy, but they're also subject to the net's dangerous tendency to dress up humbug and cant as "information." Although there are variations on the theme, basically what happens is that you ask a question, you get an answer and then you evaluate the answer you've received. This evaluation provides a feedback mechanism for determining the value of the opinionmeisters. Theoretically, the higher the evaluation score, the more qualified the expert. This is all well and good if you're settling bar bet questions, like this one from ExpertCentral, "What was Isaac Asimov's first book? My friend claims it is *Nightfall,* I think it was *I, Robot.*" The expert was right to point out that "Nightfall" was a story, not a book, and that *Pebble in the Sky* holds pride of place in Isaac's bibliography. But what if the question were "Who's a better writer, Heinlein or Asimov?" or "I'm a big fan of the movie *Alien* and I want to show it to my seven-year-old cousin when she visits, is that okay?" or "Even though I'm not yet published, my wife says that I'm the best new sci-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ence fiction writer since **David Marusek** <*http://www.marusek.com/*>. Should I quit my job and go to Clarion?"

Ask at your own risk.

Although **About.com** <*http://www.about.com*> isn't set up to offer answers to your questions, it does bill itself as "a network of sites led by expert guides." I liked the idea and execution of About.com, formerly MiningCo.com. It's a cross between an indexed link site and a site reviewzine. Each guide is certified by the company and is charged with finding the best links for her area of expertise, organizing them, and giving some brief commentary on her selections. About.com's SF pages <*http://fantasy.about.com/arts/fantasy/mbody.htm*> are guided by Corey Fisk, and she has done herself and us a service with this tight and nicely researched site. In addition to the links, the guides generate original content; the essays and reviews here are informative and sprightly. The site also features a chat room, which I didn't check out, and a bulletin board that seems to be perking along but isn't terribly busy. I take comfort in the thought that if About. com regulars who may not be SF fans click over to this corner of the site, they'll get a savvy introduction to the field.

Exit

Visiting the expert sites got me to thinking about what I'm an expert in, especially since Askme.com, Exp.com, and ExpertCentral remunerate their experts. *That's Right, Cyberfriend, Your Big Pay Day Could Come Today, The Internet Way!* I mean, we all give advice, but how many of us claim to be experts? I suppose I'm an expert on the works of James Patrick Kelly, but that's not likely to support me in my golden years. I've been involved with Clarion both as a student and instructor, so I know something about helping people write SF. (Free answer to question #3: Clarion, maybe. Quit, no way!) But am I an expert in science fiction? Not really. Even though I've read a lot of the stuff, my tastes are idiosyncratic—Bob Silverberg has *forgotten* more than I ever *knew* about the history of the genre. Am I an expert on the internet? You've got to be kidding! My qualifications for taking up this space are that I've got a modem, I'm fascinated by the net and I write a decent sentence.

Which reminds me. In February I commended a number of writers' sites to your attention. At that time I made the outrageous assertion that my friend Lisa Goldstein did not have a website. Several readers were quick to point me toward **Lisa Goldstein's Home Page** <*http://www.brazenhussies.net/goldstein/*>, not the least of whom was Lisa. Mr. Bigtime Net Expert can offer no excuse for missing this long-standing and perfectly obvious site. Actually Lisa asked that I also mention that she has banded together with **Pat Murphy** <*http://www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*> and **Michaela Roessner** <*http://www.brazenhussies.net/roessner/*> to form **The Brazen Hussies** <*http://www.brazenhussies.net/*> (Be careful with that address; a typo could get you into trouble.) According to the Brazen Hussies manifesto, "We're three award-winning writers of fantasy and science fiction. In an effort to acquaint more readers with our work, we're overcoming our natural tendency to be modest and have decided to promote our work shamelessly like the brazen hussies we truly want to be."

Brazen they may be, but not quite as brazen as some of the so-called experts on the net. O

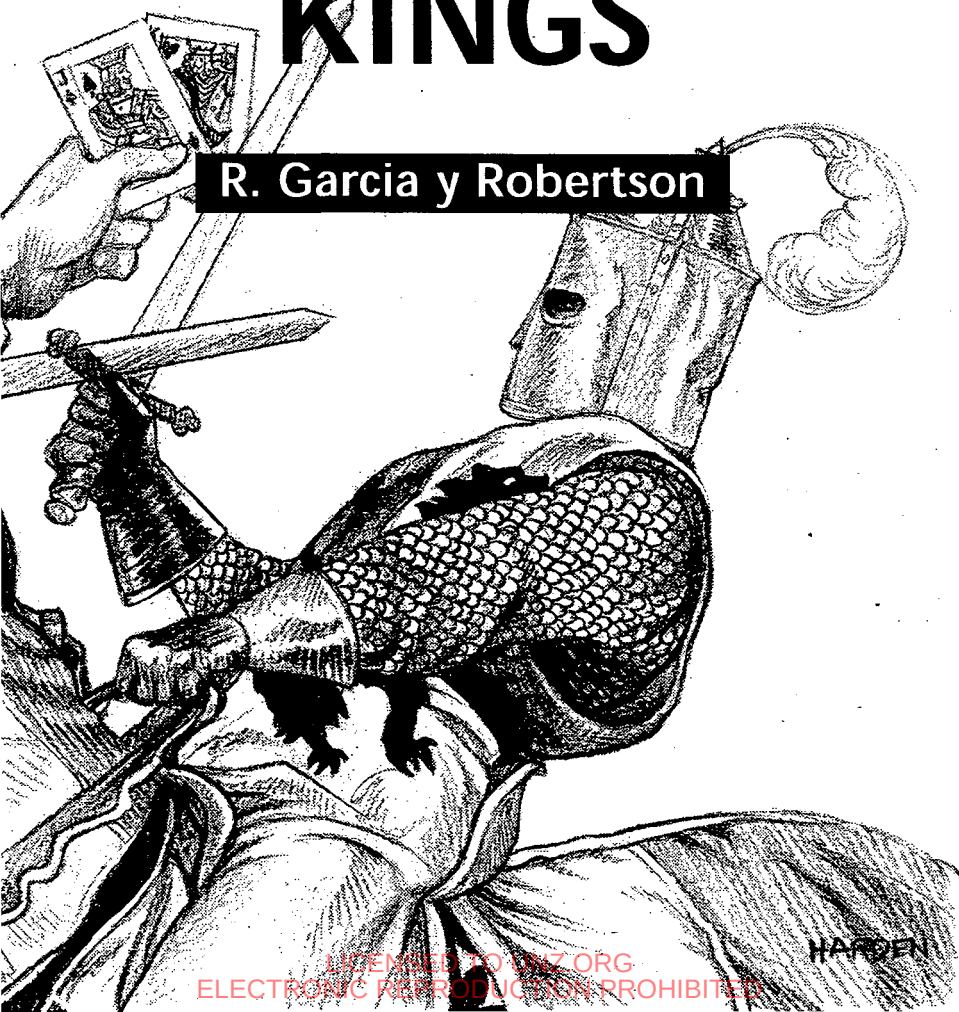
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO ...ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Illustration by Laurie Harden

ONE-EYED JACKS AND SUICIDE KINGS

R. Garcia y Robertson



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

R. Garcia y Robertson's rousing new tale began with the title and the setting—Medieval France, August 1346. "The story finally came together when I thought of the fictional point-of-view character, Reynard de Maye. Blind King John, Comte d'Alençon, and Carlo Grimaldi are all too real. Their actions at Blanque Taque and the Vallé des Clercs are more or less historical." The paperback edition of Mr. Garcia's latest novel, *American Woman* (Forge), will be out soon.

Saint Bartholomew's Eve

"Rats! Rats!" the Rat Catcher cried, coming up the empty village street, one-eyed and ragged, his cat tucked under his arm. "Who has rats for me today?"

"Not I," thought Chevalier Reynard de Maye, sitting bareheaded atop a tall black Frisian charger called "Cupid," which was draped in iron horse mail. Rats were the least of Reynard's worries. Dark-haired, clean-shaven, and dressed neck-to-toe in steel, he wore a striking crimson surcoat bearing his white griffin badge. Mounted squires held his lance, great helm, and griffin shield. Waiting behind him were more horsemen, five "lances" of the Royal Vanguard. He grimaced as the Rat Catcher sauntered past—calling loudly for rats and singing the praises of his cat. Reynard supposed that a strong smart cat must be vital to the trade.

Reynard de Maye, *seigneur* de Fontaine, and banneret of the King's Vanguard, was near to thirty—how near, even he did not know. Few people bothered to record a birth date, especially their own. Most would not recognize their own names in writing. Reynard at least could read—in Latin and French—and write if he had to. Whatever his age, worry lines made him look older, as did several days of hard riding. Nothing made Reynard feel his years like the aches and pains of being on campaign. War was very much a young man's game.

Still, there were worse fates. He might be a ragged one-eyed Rat Catcher going from hut to hovel, a sack full of dead rats slung over his shoulder, begging for vermin to kill. At least the fellow had a likely looking cat.

Today, no one was buying. Villeins hereabouts had worse than rats to worry them. King Edward of England's contemptible little army was falling back from the gates of Paris, looting and burning defenseless villages. Those were the vermin Reynard was after. With him were his rat catchers, five lances of the Royal Vanguard—two dozen knights, squires, mounted archers, and *gros valets*—the fast-moving tip of a mighty French army. At Arines, he had found the abandoned English camp, with meat still simmering on the cooking spits. Today—the 23rd of August, Saint Bartholomew's Eve—he meant to catch the English themselves, trapping them between the Somme and the sea.

First he must find King Edward, no small task in this uncouth corner of Picardy. Locals claimed the English King had headed "toward the sea." *La Mer,* a wondrous body of water a day's ride to the west—that none of them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had seen. But it was said that *la Mer* was big, bigger than the Somme, stretching from Boulogne to Normandy. "It is where the God Damns come from, no? From across the sea? Maybe they went home?" A hopeful thought. Many did not know that England was an island. Or even that their enemies were English. They called the armed men who raped their daughters and ran off their cattle the "God Damns." After an Englishman's favorite expression. As in, "God damn, these French are fools!" Or "God damn, that girl was good!"

He signaled to his men to set out again, leaving the empty little *ville* behind, raising clouds of dry white dust. Sunlight glittered in the marshy ditches. Smelling rain in the air, Reynard prayed they would beat the English today, before he had to spend another wet night in the open.

Stands of oak bordering the road blocked his view ahead. Twisting to the right, the rutted track passed a rock shepherd's rest, its stones looking like gray lumpy porridge. Here he had to rein in Cupid, finding the road suddenly choked with peasants. One moment there had been no one about but his five lances, now the narrow lane looked like the market street in Amiens, full of commoners shouting, pointing, and striking each other. Calling on him to do something. Heaven knows what.

They had a man and a woman down on the ground, beating and kicking them. Instinctively, he spurred his charger, putting Cupid's black bulk between the woman and her attackers. Something in Reynard hated to see a woman being beaten. It always unsettled him, even when she deserved it.

"Cease!" he shouted, drawing his sword. They fell back, armed only with fists and sticks, and being used to bowing to authority. "Has anyone seen the English King's army?" he demanded.

"She is a witch!" the buffoons shouted back, as if that somehow mattered. "A witch that preys on children!"

He repeated himself, even louder, "Have you seen the English King's army?" The dolts stared dumbly up, as if he were asking directions to the moon. *Mon Dieu,* he risked his life to save their swine and hovels, yet they could not so much as answer his questions! He tried again at the top of his lungs, "Has anyone seen the God Damn army?"

That got through. They shook their heads, shrugged their shoulders, and put on other convincing displays of ignorance. Clearly, they were too busy defending themselves against some wretched unarmed woman to worry about King Edward's army landing in Normandy and looting the countryside from here to Isle de France. Sighing, Reynard looked down at his horse's feet, to see who they were beating on.

She sat staring calmly back at up him, one eye purple and swollen, her hair clotted with blood, her limbs cut and bruised. Another minute or so, and they would have killed her. Yet she looked more curious than afraid, as if she'd never seen a King's Chevalier before and this first glimpse fascinated her. An unsettling attitude from someone who should be cringing in terror—no wonder they thought her a witch!

Worse yet, she had been pretty before they began beating on her, with alert brown eyes and straight white teeth. Creamy curves showed through rips in a homespun dress dyed black with oak bark. "*Merde,*" Reynard muttered to himself. Why did the Devil have to take the good-looking ones? Were there not enough hags and hunchbacks to corrupt? He shook his head, deciding Satan's motives might be no better than his. Even the Prince of Darkness had to appreciate a well-turned ankle and lively smile.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Seeing his attention had turned from the English invasion to the woman they were beating, the crowd started shouting again. "She is a vile witch! She drinks blood and cursed our children. Kill her. *Kill* her!"

Ignoring their impertinent cries, he sheathed his sword, stripped off a gauntlet, and reached his bare hand down to her. She took his hand, pulling herself up smartly, standing straight and composed, her bruised head level with his steel hip. Her hand felt cool in his, not the least sweaty with fear. He asked, "Are you a witch?" A silly-sounding question, but given the circumstances. . . .

"She is! She is!" cried the helpful crowd, happy to answer for her. He lifted his steel-clad hand, signaling for silence. His bare hand held onto hers, finding her fingers smooth and slender, like a lady's. Whoever she was, she was no peasant, despite her torn homespun. She stood solemnly examining an ugly cut on her arm, waiting for the crowd to quiet.

He asked again, "Are you a witch?"

"No," she shook her head, speaking with calm certainty. "I am not a witch." As she said it, she looked up from the gash on her arm, staring straight at him, squeezing his hand hard—urgently proclaiming her innocence with every bit of her being. Not ashamed to show that she was scared and that she needed him, knowing what her life was worth if he did not believe her. Soft brown eyes willed him to understand.

"She lies! She lies! She is a lying witch and a whore!" shouted the crowd, heaping insults on her, along with new cries to have her killed.

Reynard motioned for more silence. He would cut his throat before listening to these witless bumpkins. Witch or not, this was no excuse for boorish swine to shout suggestions at him. Of *course* she denied it—all witches *did* until they were properly tortured. Indeed, it would have taken a bolder man than him to say "*Oui*" in such a situation. His heart was already with the woman, who seemed smart and brave, and appealed to him more than all the Jacques in Picardy—a troublesome, quarrelsome lot, prone to petty rebellions. He looked levelly at the crowd. "Do any here perchance have proof?"

"For sure, for sure, my lord." Pressing closer, they fell all over themselves to show their proof, using this as excuse to be familiar. "Look what we took from her!"

Reluctantly, Reynard let go of her hand, holding out his open palm. "Put it here."

Expecting some silly tale about her causing pigs to farrow kittens, or being seen flying about the pea fields aboard a broom, he was shocked when a grubby-fingered serf gave him a handful of tiny sealed glass vials, marvelously well-made. Several clearly contained blood. Others he had to hold up in the sunlight to see the contents. He was aghast to see the worst sort of filth and vermin—fleas, lice, biting flies—what looked like rat turds, and long strands of human hair. He diligently studied the vials, wondering, "What in hell am I to do now?"

Despite her fine white hands, brave demeanor, and sincere denial, the woman *was* a witch. Too bad. He wished she had been innocent. Her guilt made things infinitely more difficult.

Reynard considered himself a passable Christian. And he remembered when witchcraft was no crime to the Church. You had to show real *harm* had been done—which made sense to him. The last couple of popes had changed that . . . but the Pope was far away in Avignon. Five lances of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Royal Vanguard made him the law here-and-now. Wrapping the vials in a silk scarf, he tucked them into his saddle bag. Then he asked, "How has she harmed you?"

Again, they pressed forward with proof. This time, mothers pushed to the front, dragging frightened children out of the crowd, claiming that she had cursed them. "She went about in secret, touching them with her wand."

"What wand?"

"This one." Eagerly, they handed him the wand, a short metal instrument of unearthly workmanship, with strange facets, insets, and knobs, feeling coldly sinister in his bare hand. One end was painted red, the other green. Taken aback, he turned to the woman, finding her smiling down at the children. He asked, "Did you touch these children with this?"

She nodded soberly. "I did."

"Whatever for?"

"To heal and protect them." Again, she stared him straight in the face, looking for understanding.

"From what?" He could ignore the vials, even see that they discreetly disappeared. But if she had harmed these children, her case was hopeless.

Her gaze dropped. "I cannot say."

"But you *must* say!" Frustration mounted. "You cannot just go about 'healing' children from some secret ill. People are bound to think the worst, especially if you give no reason."

"I know it was wrong," the witch admitted. "I just couldn't help myself." More than wrong, it was mad and dangerous, and had nearly gotten her killed outright. "But *look* at them," she protested, "they are not hurt!"

He looked at the children, standing patiently about his horse, wide-eyed and silent. Though the crowd insisted she had done them evil, the children looked well enough to him. Scared silly at the moment, but brighter and more appealing than their parents—giving Picardy a faint hope for the future. She must have read his mind, saying, "They are beautiful, are they not?"

"Yes, they are." Reynard loved children. None of his had lived for long. Time and again, he had held some long-awaited son or daughter, only to see the child sicken and die. When his wife died giving still-birth to the last one, he had not the heart to remarry. He settled for fostering friends' sons as squires, and making love to whores.

She smiled weakly up at him. "Would you not help them, too?"

He nodded, "Yes, I would." Having lost his own children, he knew how helpless a parent felt, unable to safeguard these little gifts from God. Unfortunately, under the law, "helping" these children meant turning her over to the Vicar Inquisitor in Rouen.

"She *did* do harm," a mother insisted. "I saw her. She took my daughter's blood!" The woman's little blonde daughter nodded in dumb agreement, showing the tiny red spot on her arm.

Reynard rolled his eyes. "Did you?"

Her gaze dropped again. "Only a little."

"And that was to heal and protect her?"

"No," the witch admitted, "It was not."

"Then why?" Reynard demanded, his faith in her wavering. Unless the woman gave some sensible reason, she was bound to die.

She sighed heavily. "It would do no good to tell you."

That, he could well believe. Even if she had not harmed the children, that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pin prick was a *prima facie* case of witchcraft. And with witchcraft, a case was as good as a conviction. Torture assured that. They would take her to a stone cell and do terrible things to her until she confessed. Whatever she was, witch, healer, or madwoman, would not matter. Nothing would. By now, Reynard knew that she loved these children—hearing it in her voice, seeing it in her smile. Before the torturers were through, she would confess to giving these same children the most vile and deadly diseases—just to get them to *stop*. Then they would have a mock trial, and hand her over to secular justice with a plea "to be gentle."

Of course, in this case "to be gentle" meant binding her to a stake and burning her alive.

Mon Dieu, what a day! He'd gotten up off the cold hard ground this morning, hoping to kill some English brigands—thus putting himself in a better mood. Instead, he'd had to save a battered young woman from a mob, then turn her over to heartless fiends, all for the twenty sous a day King Philip gave him on campaign. He would gladly give a thousand *francs d'or* to avoid the honor.

She saw that this was her last chance, saying softly, "At least I have not lied to you. I could have invented some plausible tale. Or denied their stories. Instead I am telling you the absolute truth. I am not a witch. And I only meant to protect these children. If I told you my full story, it would seem a fable. Please trust me." She sounded more like a woman on a mission than a witch, willing to die rather than do wrong.

Silently, he slid the wand into his saddle bag. What was there to say? They stared at each other, he in his dusty armor and red surcoat, sitting astride Cupid. Her standing at his stirrup in her soiled apron and oak-dyed dress, with its gathered skirt and torn collar. Ringed by people waiting to see what he would do. Up close, she was not as young as he first supposed. Fine lines showed by the bruises around her eyes. He had thought her young because she was pretty, and only young peasants are pretty. Now he saw that she was older, her youthful beauty somehow preserved. He shivered. Witches bathed in virgin's blood to stay young. Was *that* why she needed the child's blood? He hoped not. Already, Reynard had guessed that she would always be a mystery. He had done his best to save her, but she was impossible to protect. Some women were utterly bent on their own destruction.

Exasperated by his silence, the crowd grew restive, denied their victim and starting to resent him. He sensed them aching to speak, to ignore his orders. Sometimes, he wondered who hated the other more—ignorant louts, who had never seen the sea, and feared anything strange? Or *seigneures* forced to suffer such imbeciles beneath them? Finally, someone shouted out, "What about her *demon?*" Emboldened, others joined in. "Yes! Yes! Her demon! Her demon is proof enough!"

"Her demon?" How much more was there to this? Lice in a bottle. Blood from children. And now a demon. He gave the witch an accusing look—but she seemed as puzzled as he. Two burly churls in leather aprons stepped forward, looking like professional pig-slaughterers on holiday, dragging a third man between them, badly beaten and bleeding from the head. Tossing him in a heap at Cupid's feet, they declared, "Here is her demon. She was with him when we caught her."

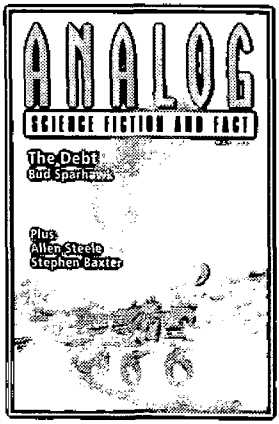
Reynard realized that in the uproar about witchcraft, he had totally forgotten that *two* people were being beaten by the mob. Speaking volumes

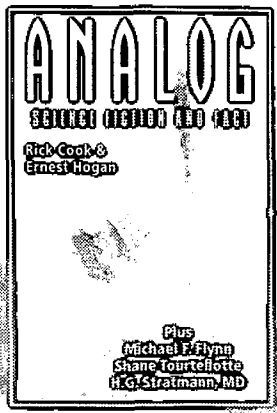
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tour the Universe

Just $6.95!

Save 60%





Explore the boundaries of imagination with the Analog Science Fiction Value Pack. You get five of our most popular back issues for just $6.95 plus shipping. That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!

Complete the order form below and mail it back to us with your payment today.

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☑ **YES!** Please send me my **Analog Science Fiction Value Pack**. I get 5 back issues for just $6.95 plus $2 shipping and handling ($8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). **My satisfaction is fully guaranteed!** My payment of $ _____ is enclosed.
(AFPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ ZIP: _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add $4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 12/31/00. 040C-NANVL1

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about his priorities. He struggled mightily to save the woman from her own folly, while utterly ignoring the man. Forgetting the wretched fellow even existed.

Small wonder. Ugly and misshapen, he wore a padded jacket, now badly torn, and loose leggings bound with leather. His face was overlarge and horribly lumpy, even allowing for the beating. And his arms and shoulders seemed unnaturally long compared to his bandy legs. Still that did not make him a demon. "Have him talk," suggested one of the pig butchers.

Reynard called down a hearty, "*Bonjour,*" to the heap lying by Cupid's hooves. "Welcome to Picardy."

Looking up, the fellow replied, "*Diolch.*" And after reflection, "*Fe eistedda i fan 'ma nawr am funud i orffwys.*" Gasps went through the throng, thrilled and horrified by his demon speech. Reynard himself spoke Latin, Walloon, plus a smattering of German, as well as his native *Langue d'oïl*. And enough English to curse them in their own tongue. None of them sounded much like this—except maybe Walloon.

"See, he speaks in tongues!" the pig butcher declared triumphantly. "And that witch was caught tending to him. With innocent children looking on!"

Reynard asked the witch, "Is that true?"

"He was hurt. I told you that I am a healer."

"Ministering to children and devils?" Reynard was at a loss to know what to make of her. And sickened to see that he must leave her to her fate. None of this got him any nearer to finding the English King. Despite her honesty and her brave demeanor, she had to die. Yet he refused to do the Inquisition's business. Better to let the mob have her; beating her to death on the spot was far more merciful than what the law had in mind. What a horrific waste! But if he turned and rode briskly away, he did not have to see it done.

Reading her fate in his eyes, she gave up pleading for herself. "Please, at least spare this poor man. He's not a devil, and only asks to sit and rest."

Reynard stared at her, eyes widening. "You understand his speech?" There was no end to the witch's surprises. She nodded silently, knowing it made her case worse—if that were possible.

"What language is that?" Despite the lumpy looks and outlandish speech, Reynard did not think the man a demon. Not the fire-breathing sort anyway.

"It is Welsh."

"Welsh?" Suddenly the truth dawned on Reynard. King Edward of England ruled Wales as well—his son was Prince of Wales. "This man is a straggler from King Edward's army!"

"Probably," she admitted. How else would some hapless Welshman end up in Picardy? This made all the difference. Witches and demons were one thing—but a Welsh straggler was a matter of capital importance. And a perfect excuse not to turn the both of them over to the law.

First, he needed to get his hands on any remaining evidence. Reynard asked the crowd if they had further proof to show him. A peasant produced a small packet containing stiff, slick, curiously marked little placards, with a magic feel to them. They disappeared into his saddle bag, joining the wand and the glass vials. Straightening in his saddle, he cheerfully told the crowd, "Disperse now, and go back to your homes." If the English have not burned them. "I will take these two straight to the Comte d'Alençon, and see that justice is done."

Mention of the King's brother had a magical effect on the throng. Grudgingly, they dispersed, satisfied that their just cause would be put before the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

highest in the land. What more could they expect? The case of this impoverished village would be decided by the King's own brother. If that did not get justice for their children, France would indeed be doomed.

Reynard was left sitting in the shade of the oaks, with his two prisoners, and his five lances of the Vanguard. He ordered a *gros valet* with a good horse to take the Welshman up behind him. Then he held out his hand to the witch, saying, "Here, I will help you up."

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"To see the Comte d'Alençon."

She started to protest, "But, I cannot. I must . . ."

He cut her short. "Let me guess. You are terribly sorry, but you have pressing secret business that utterly prevents you from calling on the King's brother—is that not so?"

She smiled in spite of herself. "Put that way, it does sound silly."

"*Exactement*. Now, may I help you mount?"

"I need my wand back first."

"Your wand?" Give a woman an inch and she will want a furlong!

"Yes, I have wounds to heal."

He considered telling her just how near she had come to being beaten to death—but doubted that it would do much good. "We have no time for magic, the Comte d'Alençon is most impatient."

"But he will want me to be presentable. And I cannot ride hurt." She was right, of course—the better she looked, the more likely it was that the Comte would listen to her. And right now, she looked terrible, bruised and dirty, in a torn dress. All she had to her credit was a sturdy pair of leather shoes. Not something likely to impress the Comte d'Alençon.

Reynard got out the wand, watching as she wielded it. He expected her to make magic passes—instead she stuck the red end to her forearm, then used the same end to spray a clear salve over her cuts and bruises. When she was done, he held out his hand, saying, "Now give it back."

"What about the Welshman?" the witch asked. "He too is hurt."

"Which would never have happened if he were not so eager to loot and burn our land. Give me back the wand." She obeyed. As she handed it back, she purposefully stuck him with the red end. It did not hurt, but it tickled, hissing like a snake. He yelped in surprise, crying, "What in hell have you done?"

"Now you too are protected," she replied cheerfully.

"Stop this!" he demanded. "I did not want to be protected. You cannot go about healing people without their permission! See where it has got you so far." He felt ashamed for that last part—it bothered him to taunt a woman so clearly doomed.

Shrugging, she took his hand and pulled herself up behind him, setting herself down on Cupid's black mail-clad crupper. She slid her arms around his steel-clad waist, saying, "This armor you wear is amazing."

"What do you mean?" He watched white fingers gingerly examine the embossed steel *roundel* protecting his armpit.

"Well, the workmanship is incredible. So precise, and all of it handmade."

"Handmade? What are armorers *supposed* to use, their feet?"

She laughed. "That is true. But it all fits together so neatly, each steel plate sliding over the next, letting you move and ride without any effort."

Hardly any. Nothing he wore seemed near as well made as the strange metal wand in his hand. What kind of witch spoke both French and Welsh,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but had never seen a suit of armor? He asked over his shoulder, "What is your name?"

"Amber," she replied. "Amber Montana Dawn. My parents were very poetic. What is yours?"

"You may call me Reynard." Amber Montana Dawn? What sort of name was *that?* A witch's name, of course. He did not tell her his titles or surname. It was dangerous to let a witch know you too well, especially if you had to betray her later. Witch's curses from the stake were said to be unusually potent. And Reynard believed in the power of names, a magic he understood. Weird as her name was, it had a rhythm to it, already exerting power over him. Just knowing her name made Amber Montana Dawn harder to discard once she was no longer useful.

"Where are you from?" he asked her.

"Somewhere far away, over the sea. A place you have never heard of." She attempted not to sound too out of place.

"Try me." He had been over the sea, to Sicily, Cyprus, Africa, and the Holy Land.

"Roundup, Montana—fifty or so miles north of Billings?"

But of course. Sliding the wand into his saddle bag, he set off, riding back through the looted village, with knights, squires, archers, and *gros valets* trotting in his wake. He passed the Rat Catcher, clumping along in his wooden shoes, with his cat beneath his arm and his rat sack slung over his shoulder. The fellow did not even look up as the horsemen thundered past. Just another one-eyed Jacques trying to make a poor living.

He found the Comte d'Alençon on the Amiens road with half the Vanguard cavalry behind him. Thousands of knights and squires sat by their mounts, ready to ride, smelling of wine and leather in the wet August heat. Behind them lay lush boglands bordering the Somme. Stately herons stalked frogs through tall dry sedges, beside green banks grazed by cattle even the English had not wanted. From here on, the Somme's banks got wider and wetter. Hoping to make the river into an impassable barrier, cutting off Edward's escape, the French had broken every bridge below Amiens, except for the fortified one at Abbeville. Picard levies stood guard at the fords, and every English attempt to cross had been thrown back. So far.

Scattered attacks would not get the English across. If Reynard were King Edward, he would pick one ford and hit it with all he had. But which one? Pont-à-Remy? Fountaine-sur-Somme? Loucq? Picquigny? Blanque Taque? There were way too many, which meant that the Picards were spread far too thin. They could not be strong enough everywhere. If they knew where King Edward was headed, the task would be ten times easier. So he meant to go straight to the Comte d'Alençon with his witch and his Welshman.

But as soon as they dismounted, the witch said "wait a moment"—and he stood fascinated as she stripped dried salve off her wounds. Scrapes and bruises went with it, seeming to vanish. Looking closer, he saw that the wounds were still there, but the cuts had closed and the swelling had gone down. Ten days healing, in the time it took to get to the Amiens road! Amber laughed at his amazement, "Told you I was a healer."

And a quick one at that. Weird and unsettling, but she did indeed look better. Strikingly so. With clear smooth skin, and no bruises to mar her smile, or hide her brown eyes. Hopefully, that would count for something with Comte d'Alençon.

Supping in full armor off a folding table covered with cloth-of-gold, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Comte d'Alençon wore a marbled white silk surcoat embroidered with gold fleurs-de-lis. With his prominent Valois nose stuck permanently in the air, he sniffed at the Welsh "demon"—who looked much the worse for the ride. "If such misshapen gnomes are what King Edward has brought, we shall thrash them handily."

"If we can find them," Reynard pointed out, wishing he had let the witch heal the Welshman as well.

"Yes, of course," the Comte agreed, indicating Reynard should share in his light supper of boiled quail eggs, ox-tongue, fresh berries, beef aspic, and pickled lamprey. "Have some wine as well. What is the beggar woman here for?"

"To help question him." Stripping off his gauntlets, Reynard peeled a quail egg, refraining from mentioning Amber's other talents.

"Why, in God's name? Give her a sou and send her off. We can certainly ask our own questions."

Taking that as her cue, Amber started backing away, not waiting for her sou. Reynard had to reach out and grab her arm. "But he does not speak French, Latin, nor any civilized tongue."

"Really?" The Comte d'Alençon seemed displeased that the Welshman had not mastered either of the universal languages. "What about English?"

"Not even English." Showing alarming lack of initiative, even for an ignorant barbarian.

Comte d'Alençon shrugged his armored shoulders. Reynard let go of Amber, and she translated their questions and the Welshman's answers. It was swiftly clear that the Welshman might as well have been speaking Arabic for all the good it did. Knowing nothing of local geography, he had no idea where the English army was headed when he fell by the wayside. He had to be told which way was the sea, that the river rolling between boggy banks was the Somme.

Frustrated, Comte d'Alençon suggested torture. "Hot irons, or a cord around his testicles, will loosen his idiot tongue."

"*Certainement*." Reynard helped himself to some lamprey, to go with his quail egg. "But if he has nothing to tell?"

"Then he shall be poorer by a pair of balls." The Comte clearly thought that no great calamity, perhaps an improvement.

Amber tried again, telling the Welshman he had better come up with something quick. The man looked blankly back. "How can he?" Amber protested. "He plainly does not know."

"Then he is likely to suffer for his ignorance." Reynard wished he had questioned his captive ahead of time. Amber looked desperately back at him, more frightened than when her own life was at stake. She was probably the type of woman who would rather die than try to translate a torture victim's incoherent screams. Reynard understood. He could happily have every Welshman in Edward's army boiled in oil, so long as he did not have to hear it.

She sighed. "Look, this won't do you any good. Do you just want to know where the English King will be? Because I can tell you that."

"You can?" He had never thought to ask her, having the Welshman in his hands.

"Yes, if I absolutely have to."

"Why are you reluctant?" If she knew, it would solve everyone's problems.

"Because it is a bad idea, totally against the rules, and likely to get me into trouble. Like inoculating children." Amber closed her eyes, seeming to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

search her memory. "This is Wednesday, August 23rd, 1346. King Edward is headed down river toward the sea. But he has no ships to take him off. In the evening he will rest his troops, then make a night march for the ford at Blanque Taque."

Reynard turned to the Comte. "Did you hear what the woman said?"

Comte d'Alençon shrugged. "Who cares what *she* says. This Welshman is the one who was with King Edward."

"But she is a witch. And a good one," Reynard assured him, started to tell how she'd healed herself. . . .

"No doubt. But why consult a seeress? We have a man who was with King Edward only this morning!"

"He does not know where the English have gone."

"So he says," sniffed the Comte. "Torture will change that tune."

Reynard was not so sure. "I believe the witch."

"What about her seems so trustworthy?" The Comte d'Alençon was not much impressed by Amber's oak-dyed dress and disheveled condition—not having seen the miraculous transformation when they dismounted.

"You have to trust me," Amber retorted. "Without me, you would not even know what this man is saying." For all the Welsh the Comte knew, she could be making it all up.

"Where did this creature come from?" Comte d'Alençon inquired.

"Roundup, Montana," Reynard replied. "North of Billings."

"That is absurd," snorted the Comte. Reynard agreed, having given up trying to get good sense out of Amber. D'Alençon peered down his oversized nose at her. "Blanque Taque, you say? Sometime late tonight?"

"Yes. King Edward will cross on the ebb tide. He means to sleep in Noyelles tomorrow night, on the far side of the Somme."

"I know where Noyelles is," the Comte replied tartly. "If this proves false, I will kindle your fire with my own hands."

"He will be there." She did not seem at all worried by the threat.

The Comte turned to Reynard. "Go to Blanque Taque, see if she is telling the truth."

"And if she is?" The whole army should be headed for Blanque Taque if this news was to do any good.

"Send word at once," the Comte d'Alençon commanded. "And hang the Welshman, since we will no longer need him. If Edward is not at Blanque Taque, hang them both." Dipping his fingers into the aspic, he indicated the audience was at an end.

"But you have already sworn to burn her," Reynard retorted sarcastically. "You said you would kindle the fire yourself."

"Poetic exaggeration." He licked aspic off his fingers. "I cannot attend to *everything* personally."

So much for the interview with the King's brother that those dolts down the road put so much faith in. Comte d'Alençon had a way of making *au revoir* sound like "go to hell." Reynard stood surrounded by van cavalry that should be moving but instead sat joking, eating, and drinking, talking about dogs and hawks. The Welshman sat down too, trying to get some of that rest he craved. Reynard sympathized. The fellow had walked from Wales to England, then sailed to Normandy, looted his way to Paris, and fled almost to the sea again, pursued by the flower of France's nobility—he deserved to get a bit of rest.

"What now?" Amber asked, seemingly at ease, having survived her first interview with the Comte d'Alençon, her wounds miraculously healed—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strangely untouched by all that whirled around her. A witch who was not a witch, a woman who spoke Welsh as easily as French. More of a mystery than most women.

He shrugged. "Clearly, the Comte d'Alençon will do nothing. If King Edward is to be caught south of the Somme, I have to do the catching."

"You will never be able to stop him." She showed absolutely no faith in his prowess. Fine compliment coming from a woman whose life he had saved—temporarily, at least.

"Not alone," he admitted. And not with five lances of the Royal Vanguard. "I will need men, a lot of them. And horses."

"And a major miracle." Amber shook her head woefully. "At least, you will not be needing me."

He looked up. "Oh, but I will."

"I did as you asked." She had told her story to the King's brother, acting like the rest was something she wanted no part of. "Edward will indeed cross at Blanque Taque. Do you not believe me?"

"Absolutely," Reynard assured her. "Blanque Taque is the lowest ford on the Somme, exposed only at low tide. Also the farthest ford from here. The very place I would pick to cross, were I Edward of England. But as you say, he cannot cross until well after midnight, when the tide turns." He believed her completely, though that did not mean he could let her go.

"So?" Again she gave him that utterly sincere look, as if honesty could somehow save her.

"You heard the good Comte d'Alençon. You are to accompany me to Blanque Taque. As the King's brother, he is used to being obeyed."

She shook her head again. "Come rack or ruin?"

"Exactly." He saw that she was starting to see how things worked in the Royal Vanguard.

"And this Welshman comes with us?" She indicated the poor fellow resting at their feet.

"Part way." It hardly seemed useful dragging the wretched fellow about, since the Welshman knew nothing that could aid them, and Comte d'Alençon meant to hang him whatever the outcome.

"Then you must let me heal him."

Reynard raised in eyebrow. "Must I?"

"Or I will not go with you." She had an amazing attitude, with no regard for the reality around her. Tempting him to tie the witch to a saddle, to show her what little choice she had.

Something stayed his hand. Maybe her magic. It had not stayed that village of vengeful Picard peasants—but it certainly worked on him. He went to his saddle bag and got out the wand. Watching her minister to the Welshman, Reynard realized that she *was* really a healer, and not just because she had a metal wand that worked miracles. Her whole being seemed to change. No longer wary, or aloof, she threw herself happily into the task of saving this ignorant misshapen stranger. Her face lit up, as it had when she saw the children. Either truly delighted by the chance to help people, or the most deceptive witch imaginable. He tried to believe the former, if only for peace of mind.

When the Welshman was ready to ride, Reynard told his most trusted knight bachelor, "Take your squire and two spare horses, cross over to the north bank at Abbeville, then ride as fast as you can to Godemar de Fey. He commands the Picards on guard at the mouth of the Somme. Tell him King Edward will try to cross at Blanque Taque, tomorrow at low tide. You may

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

give warnings on the way, to any who will listen, but you must get to Godemar de Fey before ebb tide on the morrow. Understand?"

He said he did, but Reynard had him repeat the message word-for-word, making his squire do likewise. "No mistakes. No stopping for supper. Godemar de Fey has a couple of thousand men-at-arms, and some crossbowmen. They deserve to know that they will face the entire English army before breakfast tomorrow. Or few of them will likely see supper."

Having done what he could for Godemar de Fey and his hapless Picards, he galloped the rest of his five lances down the road toward Amiens, with his captives mounted on led horses. Half a league down the road, he came upon several thousand Genoese crossbowmen, boiling their midday pasta. Condottieri in French service. No help here. They were afoot, and once done with their wine and pasta, likely to be asleep. Hunting up Carlo Grimaldi, one of the Italian commanders, he told him about Blanque Taque. Since these Italians had no hope of getting there by dawn, he left his Welsh demon with them, telling Grimaldi, "Keep him out of the Comte d'Alençon's sight."

By the time the Welshman tasted his first pasta, Reynard was again pounding down the Amiens road, not stopping until he came on the next fragment of the Royal Vanguard. Germans this time. Bohemian knights and Rhenish mercenaries, along with a large body of Luxemburg men-at-arms. Philip of France had brought allies and hirelings from all over Europe to teach England a lesson. With them was the Vanguard commander himself, King John the Blind of Bohemia. Less confident commanders-in-chief might hesitate to have a blind man leading their vanguard—but King Philip was the Comte d'Alençon's brother.

Despite his blindness, John of Bohemia was already ahorsed, and wearing fluted German armor. His squire held his crowned helm with the eye slits welded shut, topped by his badge of three black ostrich feathers. Some men's first taste of war made them crazy for more. King John of Bohemia could never get enough and fought happily in other people's battles, making do with tournaments during times of peace. Blindness had not changed that. He listened eagerly to the news about Blanque Taque. "Are you sure they are making for the ford? How do you know Edward will be there?"

Having no Welsh straggler to dress up his story, Reynard admitted straight out, "A witch told me."

German men-at-arms laughed, and called out for their blind king's benefit, "A pretty one, too, even in black rags. He is French after all." Amber waited patiently on his best traveling palfrey, her reins held by a squire.

"And you trust her?" asked King John, the only one not looking Amber over.

"When what she says makes sense."

"Let me hear her story," the King commanded, "since I cannot be swayed by appearances. At my age, all I have to live for is the hope of dying in battle."

"You will." Amber spoke in clear unaccented Middle German. Knights stiffened in the saddle, hearing her pronounce doom on their king, and in their own language. An unsettling surprise giving weight to her words. They stared at Amber in silent curiosity, mixed with a degree of dread.

"Are you sure?" Blind King John tilted his head sharply.

"Absolutely." Terse impeccable German made Amber sound chillingly certain—a hag ranting in French would be far easier to scoff at.

"Outstanding," King John declared. "Unless you say this just to tease a blind old man?"

"No, I would not tease you." Concern showed in her voice, real caring for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this bloodthirsty old king. "I could not say such a thing unless it was true." Reynard wondered if she would ever lie, even to save herself. Unearthly honesty got annoying.

"When will this happen?" King John asked happily.

"Soon," she assured him.

"God in Heaven! You say King Edward is marching on Blanque Taque by the mouth of the Somme? And I will soon die in battle? Will it be there at the ford?"

"Not there. But soon," was all she would say.

"Splendid. I will have one more victory before dying sword in hand. Trust this witch to the Ends of the Earth! She is my talisman!"

Reynard could see Amber had won him over. King John could not hold her rags against her, and just heard the genuineness in her voice. Some claimed King John's love of battle had blinded him, that he lost his sight in a tournament practicing for war. Others called that poetic nonsense, saying he was blinded for his blasphemy. Either way, he would not balk at following a witch into battle. His knights looked less convinced, but with their king under this witch's spell, what could they do?

"You need only trust her as far as Blanque Taque," Reynard reminded them.

"We cannot get to the Somme mouth until after midnight," complained the King of Majorca, whose men were even farther back.

"All the better," declared Blind King John. "I prefer to fight in the dark, where no one has an advantage."

His knights laughed, their good humor restored. King John gave orders, and the great armored mass lurched off down the Amiens road, back the way Reynard had come, led by their blind king and his new-found seeress. Reynard rode alongside Amber, helping guide her palfrey. He saw the Italians flash past, still sitting at their supper.

When they passed Comte d'Alençon's cavalry, they were mounting up, preparing to follow the Vanguard commander—the blind leading the brainless.

At dusk, they stopped to eat. Reynard helped Amber out of the saddle. Weary and hungry himself, he expected to find her exhausted, having had only the briefest rest since he rescued her from the mob that morning. Instead he found her grip strong, and her eyes bright as ever. He asked, "What witchcraft keeps you so fresh in the saddle?"

"This." She opened her hand, showing him a pair of tiny white tablets.

He studied them suspiciously. "Where did you get those?"

"I palmed them the last time you let me use my medikit."

"Medikit?"

"My metal wand. Try one." She handed him a tablet, popping another in her mouth to show they were safe. He hesitated, then did the same. The tablet tasted like long dead snakes, but he did not think she would harm him. And if he meant to keep on going into the night, it would take magic to hold him up. He washed it down with wine.

Weariness fell away. Suddenly he felt wide-awake, with no desire to eat, able to ride forever if need be. Truly amazing. From just a little white tablet? He shook himself, saying, "These are incredible. How many do you have?"

"Not enough for everyone."

"Yes, and the horses would need them too. But what will I do now? I was going to try to sleep a little."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Give me my cards," she told him.

"Your cards?"

"That package the peasants took from me." She too sounded perky, even playful. Another side to her, unless it was the tablets.

He gave her the pack from his saddlebag, and she spread the cards out. "Court cards count ten. Aces eleven or one. All other cards count face value. The object of the game is to get cards totaling twenty-one without going over."

"These spots tell the value of the placard?" He fingered a couple of cards, awed by their slick uniformity. "What do the spots mean? Why are some hearts, and others red lozenges or black *trefoils*. . . ?"

"Those are suits." Amber swept up the cards, smiling at him. "Suits do not matter in blackjack." She dealt him two cards face up. "Look, you got a jack and a seven, that makes seventeen. Four short of twenty-one. Want another card?"

"No." Two were plenty at the moment. The jack had two heads, one up, own down, faced in opposite directions, each with a single eye staring at him.

"Smart." Amber dealt herself two cards. "Sixteen. Too bad. Dealer hits." She dealt herself another card. "Dealer busts. You win."

"I win." He had done nothing.

"See how easy it is?" She swept up his cards, dealing him two more. "Of course, it is even more fun if you bet."

By the time the horses were rested, she had won the twenty sous the king owed him for the day. They mounted up and set out again. Something in the tablet put new colors in the sunset. Darkness rose from between the trees, spilling over the road. Still they pressed on. Day or darkness made no difference to Blind King John, and his Germans were adept at obeying orders. Far better than the French, or so it always seemed to Reynard—French for style, Italians for fun, Germans for obedience, and the English for duplicity.

Past Abbeville, the road became a boggy track skirting the Somme estuary. Reynard urged his Frisian onward, dodging trees and leaping sinkholes, avoiding every obstacle, suddenly able to see by starlight. Shifting shadows turned the night ride into a wild Walpurgis Nacht, full of unseen terrors and Teutonic horsemen wearing grotesque helms, their black ragged banners flapping in the night wind.

Without warning, first light showed over the Somme. Saint Bartholomew's Eve was ending, and Blanque Taque loomed ahead. Here, the Somme estuary widened, flowing seaward over a shelf of white rocks that formed a shallow ford at low tide. Reynard heard shouts ahead, in English. Hastily leaving the witch under guard, he plunged forward with the Germans, slamming into a startled mass of men and pack animals trying to cross the ford. Wagons sat hub deep in the water piled with wine casks, gilt furniture, candlesticks, bolts of velvet and feather beds.

Slack tide had turned to flood. He found himself in a half-light melee amid rising waters. Blind King John roared useless orders to his knights, swinging happily at friend and foe alike. Disciplined Germans fell to looting. Even so, the English were easily beaten. Reynard realized that their main body had already escaped across the ford to the north bank of the Somme. Every attempt to follow was met by a hissing rain of arrows.

Saint Bartholomew's Day dawned, and the sea rolled back up the Somme estuary, ending the fight. Armored bodies littered the bank. Baggage wagons bobbed in the current, feathered with arrows and borne off by the tide.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

French reinforcements kept arriving, first more of the Vanguard under the Count of Flanders. Then Blois with some of the main body, devastated to have missed the battle. Suddenly tired and hungry, Reynard went looking for his witch. He found his guards asleep, and Amber gone.

Witches Night

His first thought was, "Good for her." He did not blame the tired guards, who were no match for a crafty determined witch. And he would be glad not to turn Amber over to the Vicar-Inquisitor. But he already missed her. It bothered him that she would always be a mystery. He still had her wand and glass vials, even her card deck, but that was not much.

Not compared to what he had seen. Her wand worked miracles. The Welshman had suffered disfiguring wounds, yet when Reynard last saw him, the man had been happily on the mend, sitting down to a heaping bowl of pasta. Minor cuts and bruises were gone in hours. Terribly handy when you were about to go into battle. But the wand would not work for him. He could not even get it to give up the white tablets that took away hunger and weariness—and which he had started to crave alarmingly. A tablet or two would see him through what looked to be a busy day.

Instead, he suffered complete collapse. Telling his Ensign to take over, he stripped off his back-and-breast and helmet, lying down by the side of the road and falling instantly asleep.

He awoke feeling famished, having eaten nothing since picking at the Comte d'Alençon's quail eggs and pickled lamprey. Worse yet, the whole world had gotten turned around. The morning sun was in the wrong part of the sky. Unless the Somme had somehow reversed course.

Slowly, Reynard realized there was a simpler explanation. He had slept all day, awaking late in the afternoon. The sun was in the "wrong" place because it was about to set. One tiny white tablet had turned his body around, exchanging day for night, and making him mistake east and west. Witchcraft for sure.

Putting on his armor, he mounted Cupid, and set out in search of the Comte d'Alençon, and hopefully another free meal. He took along his share of the loot, one of the great six-foot longbows the English used at the ford. It appeared to be made of Spanish yew, and the arrows were a yard long with wicked chisel-pointed heads. He had seen the arrows slice through chain mail, and at closer range he bet they could do the same to plate armor.

By now, the Vanguard had got turned around, and headed back toward Abbeville, meaning to cross the Somme in lackadaisical pursuit of the English. Even this tardy pursuit was not pressed. Having broken most of the bridges over the lower Somme, the whole French army was forced to cross at Abbeville, creating a traffic jam it would take until tomorrow to untangle.

Despite sleeping half the day, Reynard easily caught up with the Comte d'Alençon, finding the King's brother dining on cold capon and gilded carp. Reynard made a knee, and was rewarded with some gilded carp, making him feel like d'Alençon's dog. Or a trained seal. But hunger had the better of his pride.

Comte d'Alençon congratulated him on finding the right ford, "If only you found it sooner, we could have caught them."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reynard acknowledged the semi-compliment, thinking, "If you had moved sooner, we would have." Comte d'Alençon's failure to drive straight for Blanque Taque had cost them their best chance of catching King Edward. Sampling the cold capon, he showed the Comte his captured bow. "Here is what turned us back at the ford; they shoot yard-long arrows, wonderfully well."

Comte d'Alençon was not impressed. "Bows are for hunting. We will show the English *war*."

"This is no hunting bow. Here, look at the arrow. It is not a broad head, but has a chisel point, designed to penetrate armor." He washed the capon down with several swallows of the Comte's brandy. "That Welshman had the arms of an archer. I will show it to him, and see if he knows how to use it." Too bad Amber was not around to help interrogate the prisoner. Reynard wondered how many of these bows they might have to face.

"Too late," the Comte told him. "I have had the man hung."

"You have?" Cold capon and lukewarm brandy lost its flavor.

"I caught him skulking among the Italians. No need to thank me," the Comte declared, "but next time, do it yourself. I cannot attend to everything personally."

Reynard set down his half-eaten capon, thinking of the poor Welshman who'd only wanted to rest. He'd got that, and hopefully his fill of wine and pasta as well beforehand. So much for learning more about these wonderfully murderous bows.

"And the witch shall be turned over to the Vicar-Inquisitor of Rouen," Comte d'Alençon added.

"Yes, the witch. Alas, I have temporarily . . ."

"Do not worry," the Comte dismissed his concern. "I have seen to her as well."

"You have?" He stared at the King's brother.

"Of course," Comte d'Alençon sucked bits of gilded carp off his fingers. "Nothing seems to get done, unless *I* do it. Picard militia caught her trying to cross at a ford. She is being held for the Vicar-Inquisitor, who should arrive in a couple of days, along with the Archbishop of Rouen."

"But she has her good side," Reynard protested.

"Her good side?" Comte d'Alençon chuckled indulgently. "The woman is a witch, a fiend from hell bent on serving Satan."

"She is always going about curing people." He thought about the tingle when Amber touched him with her wand.

"Or cursing them," the Comte pointed out. "Would you know the difference? I certainly would not."

Nor would the Archbishop of Rouen. "But she told us about Blanque Taque. Was that the work of Satan?"

Comte d'Alençon shrugged. "Women are an eternal mystery. Especially when they are witches. Besides, we no longer need her, King Edward is at Noyelles."

"Just as she said he would be," Reynard reminded him.

"So?" The Comte arched an eyebrow.

"She found Edward once, she can find him again. She has an uncanny way of knowing what will happen next." Damned useful in pursuit of a dangerous elusive enemy.

Comte d'Alençon looked at him as if he were mad. "But King Edward is no longer lost."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reynard sighed. Maybe he was mad, but this all seemed a monumental mistake. "Part of me feels that she is innocent."

"No doubt the part between your legs. Whenever a pretty witch is caught, some gallant fool tries to save her from the stake."

For once, the Comte might be right. If Amber was not a witch, what *was* she? Still, he did not want to see her burned—a clear sign that he himself was bewitched! "I just cannot be sure she is guilty."

Comte d'Alençon smiled. "You do not need to be. That is why we have a Vicar-Inquisitor."

And why Rouen dungeon had a torture chamber. When they were done with Amber, there would be no doubt about her guilt. Turning his back on carp and cold capon, Reynard remounted Cupid and went up the road in search of his witch, taking his longbow with him.

Dusk was falling when he found Amber, sitting under guard in a grove of oaks. She looked in good shape, still wearing her black bark-dyed dress and dirty apron. Her right ankle was chained to a yard-long log, to keep her from running off. As he walked over, the sergeant of the guard leaped up from his seat by the fire, warning Reynard away. "My lord, this woman is a witch. Not to be talked to on peril of your immortal soul."

"I will risk it." If talking to Amber was a mortal sin, he was thoroughly damned.

Lowering his voice, the sergeant whispered, "She was caught talking to a cat."

"A cat?" Reynard rolled his eyes. "Then I have several aunts who must be witches, for they talk to their cats all the time. And to their birds and horses as well."

The sergeant's voice dropped even lower, "But my lord, the cat talked *back!*"

"Really?" The man looked deathly serious.

"By the Virgin and all the Saints," swore the sergeant. "I myself heard it speak—as did others, all of them sober."

"What did the cat say?"

"Who knows?" the sergeant shrugged. "It was not French."

"So I suppose there was no point holding the cat for questioning?"

"My lord, we tried, but it got away."

Reynard did not know whether to laugh or cry. Amber had an absolute talent for getting deeper into trouble. "Well, it is my soul to risk," he told the sergeant. "Have your men back away, so they will not be tainted." Guards hastened to obey, moving to the far side of their fire. He sat down next to Amber, saying, "We meet again."

She smiled, clearly happy to see him. "I am sorry I deserted you."

"But you had pressing business to attend to?"

"Exactly," she nodded.

"With a cat?"

"No," she laughed lightly. "The cat came to me."

"Will you not take your situation seriously?"

Her brown eyes studied him intently. "Would it do me any good if I did?"

"Probably not," he admitted. "When I found you gone, I hoped you would get clean away."

"As did I," she added ruefully.

Reynard looked glumly at her, fast losing enthusiasm for such brainless folly. He did not think Comte d'Alençon would ever catch King Edward, not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

unless the English sat down and waited for him. Nor did he relish seeing Amber handed over to the Vicar-Inquisitor. His manor of Fontaine-sur-Maye lay just across the Somme, sorely tempting him to give up and go home.

"Are you sad?" Amber sounded solicitous.

"Tired, for certain." And sick of leading about lordly commanders who were dead from the neck up.

"Then you should rest. Night is not far off."

He could hear the healer in her. What an infernal waste! Reynard got up to go, frustrated by what could not be helped.

"Could I have my cards?" she asked. "To pass the time."

He nodded, remembering he still owed her twenty sous.

"And maybe my wand as well. It is useless to you."

"Do not ask for too much," he told her. Reaching down he hefted the log she was chained to, finding it not too heavy to lift but too big and bulky run with. She gave him a quizzical look. "Just making sure you will be here when I get back," he told her.

Long shadows stretched across the road as he and Cupid returned to where his five lances waited. Opening his saddle bag, he got out the cards. And the wand as well. The cold metal felt weird in his hand, heavy with power. He shook his head in disgust.

Stuffing both cards and wand back into the saddle bag, he took his helmet and shield from his squire, lashing them tightly to his saddle, along with a blanket roll. Then he turned to his Ensign, saying, "I am going home to Fontaine-sur-Maye. Tell the others they are free to go as well, or stay with the Vanguard if they wish. Blind King John will see they are paid."

"Why, my lord?" asked the startled Ensign.

"Because I have had enough." Ten times enough, actually.

"My lord, the Comte may not be pleased."

Armor rattling, he swung into the saddle. "The Comte may go to hell." And soon.

He trotted his big black Frisian back down the darkening road to where Amber sat chained to her log. As he did, he stripped off his steel gauntlets, replacing them with riding gloves. He reined-in before the surprised sergeant. "The Comte d'Alençon must see you at once."

"My lord, why? The Comte d'Alençon? I mean . . ." The sergeant was clearly not used to summonses from the King's brother.

"He wants to hear about the cat. Hurry, man, the Comte has hung one poor fool today; do not make it two."

Horrified, the frightened sergeant sprinted off into the gloom. His guardsmen watched him go, amazed by the sudden departure. Turning to Amber, Reynard reached down. "Hand me your log."

She obeyed instantly, witches being notoriously quick-witted. Slinging the log across his saddle, he reached down for her. Amber was up behind him at once, arms about his waist, knees tucked against his steel thighs, sitting atop his blanket roll. Before the astonished guards could get up, he put spurs to Cupid, plunging into the dark grove.

Crashing through shadowy foliage, he heard startled shouts behind him, and urged his black charger deeper into the darkening woods, ducking gnarled branches and leaping oak roots, with the log in his lap, and Amber clinging to his back. Time and again, he swerved to avoid trees, or just to confuse pursuit, until he himself was fairly well lost amid the black oak boles. Shouts faded behind him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He forged on until it was too dark to see the way. Then he reined-in, and listened. He heard a distant call, then nothing, just his own labored breathing. Damp night air chilled the back of his neck, between his bowl-cut hair and the steel of his armor. He shivered from tension as drops pattered down from the foliage above.

Amber let go of his waist. He felt her hand on the back of his neck, rubbing away the chill. "Thank you, thank you," she told him with all her heart. "Thank you so very much."

He could hear a catch in her voice, as if after all this she would now start to cry. Reynard smiled at that, and at his ridiculous predicament—sitting in the dark, riding double with a fugitive, lost in the woods, with a log in his lap instead of a lance. He had defied the Comte's orders, deserted his king, and put his soul in peril. For what? For some witch with a wild story and an absurd name.

"Where are we going?" Amber asked, peering over his shoulder at the pitch black woods.

"Home," he told her. "They are never going to catch King Edward."

"Do not be so sure," she whispered. "Here, give me my wand."

"Were you hurt?" Had she taken an arrow he did not know about?

"No. Just let me have it. I promise I will not stick you."

Fumbling in the dark, he found it in his saddle bag. Having imperiled his soul to free her, it seemed silly not to give Amber her things. He handed the wand back to her. Fortunately there was no one hereabouts for her to "cure."

As she took the wand, he heard a click, and a beam of light cleaved the darkness. He gasped in surprise. It was not at all like torchlight, but a bright narrow beam, like sunlight streaming through a hole in the roof into a pitch dark room.

His head spun about. The beam of light came from her wand. "Here," she told him, "I will turn it down." The beam dimmed, but he could still see whatever it fell on.

"Magnificent!" He set off, following the beam through the dark wood. What was the use of being damned if you could not take advantage of it?

He found a sheltered hollow, with good cover overhead. Amber slid off Cupid, and he handed down her log. He loosened his armor, then swung out of the saddle. This had the makings of a most romantic night, cold and rainy, in full armor, and his damsel in a peasant dress chained to a log. Lancelot surely lacked for better.

Amber acted supremely happy, saying, "Here, sit down, rest yourself. I will get a fire going and something to eat. Wish it could be more, I owe you so terribly much."

"With your leg chained to a log?"

She looked down at the chain. "Cannot be helped at the moment." She did something to the wand, and another tablet dropped into her hand. This one she placed on the ground where it burst into white hot flame. She fed in sticks, and soon had a fire going.

"Is there anything that wand will not do?" he wondered.

"A lot. Electronics are minimal, mostly medical diagnostics. I was really screwed when some big-fisted serf knocked the comlink out of my ear."

Elect-tonics? He could not even say it. "'Com-link? Really screwed?'"

She laughed, "Until I met you." He could see her getting giddy with relief. Her bravery in the face of burning had all been a front. How like a woman, too scared to show her fear!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Here, let me help you out of your armor, so you can be comfortable." She took off his back-and-breast, thigh plates, greaves, roundels, sabatons and steel sleeves, leaving him in just his chain mail, hose, and quilted doublet. "And to show my full appreciation, dinner." She placed it in his hand. "Full meal tab, packed with vitamins, and enough calories to keep you going."

"Sounds delicious." He stared at the fat tablet. Not quite cold capon and gilded carp.

She took one to show it was safe, "*Bon appétit.*"

Safe perhaps, but utterly tasteless and hardly filling. And with no wine to wash it down. Still he felt refreshed, more alert, not at all ready for sleep. She must have sensed his feelings. "I can give you something to put you to sleep," she offered.

"I do not doubt it." He slept all day, but the witch probably had pills that could make him fly.

"Or we could get out the cards," she suggested.

He did. She sat down on her log, laying the wand in her lap for light. "You are never going to get your twenty sous back in blackjack. I will have to teach you poker. We can start with stud. I will deal a few hands face-up, until you get the feel. One-eyed jacks and suicide kings are wild."

One-eyed jacks he had seen. "What are suicide kings?"

"Like this," she showed him a king with a sword held behind his head, as though he were stabbing himself through the temples.

He nodded. "And what is wild?"

"You'll see." She dealt by the light of her wand. By the time he was thirty sous in the hole, it started to rain hard. "Do not worry," she told him, "the cards are waterproof."

Branches above caught most of it, but some came through. Leaning his head back, he wet his throat from a trickle. Having had nothing to drink but the Comte's brandy, rainwater off the trees tasted heavenly. The fire sank to a sizzle. By the time his loses topped forty sous the rain had stopped, and he felt ready for bed. Any more of this card play and she would own his horse and armor. "Will your pill really put me to sleep?"

"Like a baby," she assured him.

He got up and fetched his bedroll, wrapping it around her. Amber smiled her thanks, getting down off her log, packing away the cards and handing him the pill. He lay down alongside her. Surcoat, quilted doublet, and chain mail were cover enough in a mild August drizzle, especially next to a warm bundle in a bedroll. He fingered the pill, saying, "You are like no witch I ever imagined."

Switching off the light, she snuggled closer, getting maximum protection from his big mail-clad body. "And you are not just another murderous worm in an iron cocoon."

"What do you mean?"

"That is what the peasants call men-at-arms."

"I know—but why am I different?"

She ran slim fingers through his damp hair. "I do not know why you are different. But you are. You are brave, and honest, and caring. And the only one who believed me."

He smiled silently. Witches were still very much women, never willing to see the world as it was. He did not believe her, he just did not care. Facing another wet night in the open, he swallowed the pill, praying it would put him to sleep. Promising himself that tomorrow night things would be dif-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ferent, that he would have this witch in a proper bed. Warm, dry, and out of her dress. On that happy thought, he drifted off.

By now, Reynard was used to waking on wet ground, but always before his five lances had been with him. It was a shock to open his eyes and find himself alone in the woods, with no five lances. No Royal Vanguard. Not even a squire or *gros valet* to do his bidding.

Smelling smoke, he rolled over to see Amber, up and awake, tending a fire in her torn dress. The whole amazing Saint Bartholomew's Day came back to him, from the wild fight at the ford, to running off with this bedraggled witch. He propped himself up on an elbow, thinking that she had better be worth it. "*Bonjour, sorcière.*"

Smiling, she "bonjoured" him back. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Breakfast" turned out to be another full-meal tab, some roast hazelnuts, and his helmet half-full of rain water. Still it somehow filled him. He felt fit and rested, and freed of all responsibility, passing glad to be headed home. He told her, "Today we cross the Somme."

"Good," Amber acted pleased. "I have been trying to get across it for days now." Sitting there in her sodden dress, chained to the log beneath her, Amber still pretended she had a choice. He liked that obstinate sense of purpose.

She insisted on polishing each piece of his armor with her apron before putting it on him. When she was done, she stepped back as far as her chain allowed, admiring her work. "My knight in shining armor."

He thanked her, swinging himself into the saddle. She handed up her log, then mounted behind him. On the far side of the clearing, hazel thickets replaced the big stands of oak. Here was where Amber had gotten the hazelnuts. He came on a footpath, following it across a stream, onto some peasant's pasture. Dismounting at the first hovel, he demanded meat, drink, and an ax. The surprised family hastened to obey, startled to have a mounted lord come trotting out of their woods, with a log on his lap, and a peasant woman riding pillion behind him. They gave him several lengths of sausage, a crock of cider, and a big double-bladed woodsman's ax.

Laying Amber's chain across the log, he told her, "Do not look. And for your foot's sake, don't flinch." She stared off toward the tree tops. He swung the heavy ax through a long glittering arc, snapping the chain an inch from her ankle.

She glanced down, relieved to see all her toes in place. "You did that neatly."

"It is what I do best." He was only being honest. Reynard had spent his whole life learning to cleave steel. Handing the family back their ax, he mounted up, then reached down for Amber.

"Are you not going to pay them?" she asked.

"What for?" He had given them back the ax.

"Here," she held out her hand. "Give me some of what you owe me."

Fishing silver pennies out of his saddle bag, he watched her dole them out to the whole family, solemnly paying for their sausage and cider. As each of them took their penny, she cheerfully touched them with the end of her wand. Reynard winced, seeing yet more trouble. The peasants eyed her suspiciously, but they feared him, and wanted the pennies. When she was done, they set out, again. All that remained of Amber's fetter was a steel anklet, with a single dangling link of chain, shining in the sun.

He looped downstream, aiming for a little-known ford of the Somme. Bare

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

roads and boggy green banks seemed weirdly empty. Aside from a healthy sprinkling of horse shit, he saw small sign that two armies had marched up and downriver—one trying to cross, the other trying to hold the line of the Somme. He found the ford utterly deserted. The Picards were gone, now that King Edward had crossed. Wading his overloaded war horse into the sluggish water, he felt the Somme rise past his stirrups, flooding his steel sabatons. Amber raised her legs. Swollen by rains, the river came halfway up his greaves, then started to recede. He urged Cupid forward, splashing up onto the far bank. "We are across," Amber announced happily.

No happier than him. He was almost home. Ahead lay the hugely thick Forest of Crécy, and, on the far side, Fontaine-sur-Maye. He knew every trail in these woods, but he did not say so, preserving the element of surprise. Instead he talked of trivial things, saying, "Tell me about Montana."

"It is a big place, almost as big as France, with vast empty spaces, tall mountains, and country so flat it seems you see more of the earth and sky. Big sky country."

"So why did you leave it?"

"Not to do harm."

"But why?"

She sighed, resting her head against his back. He could feel her torn between natural truthfulness, and something else. Something huge and sinister holding her back. "It is way against the rules for me to tell you."

"But you break your rules, healing children without permission." He thought of the scene this morning.

"Then it is to do good. It would do you no good to know why I am here. In some ways, it would do you very ill."

"And to do what you must do, you had to get across the Somme?" When she first ran away, Picards caught her at a ford.

"One more thing I owe you." She squeezed him through his armor. What was her secret that might do him ill? Why did she need to be north of the Somme? Tonight was Friday, the Witches Night. Was she planning some secret meeting? Some Black Sabbath? Well, he had plans of his own. And these were *his* woods. Freeing her from the log might well have been a mistake. But he did not think she would run off again. Not this deep in the Forest of Crécy.

So they threaded slowly through the woods, stopping to picnic on sausage and cider. Amber seemed in no hurry to be anywhere, just happy to be free, smiling and talking, clearly pleased to be with him. When they remounted, she patted his charger's black mail-covered flank, asking, "What do you call him?"

"Cupid," he told her, taking up the reins.

"You must be a romantic," she replied, looping her arms about his waist, "naming your horse after the god of love."

He supposed she was right. Witches Night was falling when they reached the far fringe of the wood. Dismounting, he told her to watch Cupid while he found shelter. She asked, "Do you want the wand?"

"No. I will find my way." He set off into the gloaming. Fifty yards away was a woodcutter's cottage. The woodcutter and his family had just sat down to dinner, and were stupefied to have their feudal lord walk in out of the summer twilight. Immediately, they went down on their knees, offering him their chairs, and the food off the hearth.

He thanked them, saying that would not be necessary. "But I need this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cottage for the night. Take what you want, just leave the food and bedding, and do not come back until dusk tomorrow." He hustled them out into the twilight, to find shelter where they could. The woodcutter had relatives in Wadicourt, three or four miles away. Hopefully, he had friends closer. The place was not much, but it had a roof, a warm fire, and a rope bed with a straw mattress—which were what he wanted most.

Lighting a candle, he went to get his witch, telling Amber, "I have found us a warm place for the night. Dry as well."

"Warm and dry at the same time? What a wonderful concept." When he showed her the cottage, it was Amber's turn to be amazed. "Unbelievable, and with a fire going. How is this possible?"

"Some English knights had it, but I chased them off."

"Really? Five of them?" The family's bowls and cups still sat on the blackened hearth. He shrugged armored shoulders, not liking to brag. Leaning over, she lifted the lid on the kettle. "These knights were cooking pease porridge?"

"They were very domestic men-at-arms," he admitted, "more handy with a ladle than a lance."

She slid the cover back on the pot, smiling at him, "No doubt that is why you routed them so easily?"

"No doubt." One French knight was more than a match for any five English men-at-arms, especially imaginary ones. He began removing his armor, stripping down to the stained hose and quilted doublet he wore beneath his chain mail.

Amber slipped a pill from her wand into the porridge, stirred it in, then ladled out two servings. "Pretty simple fare for knights."

"No one ever accused the English of knowing how to cook," Reynard pointed out. They stretched out the pease porridge with the last of the sausage and cider. Rain began falling, and the warm little hovel seemed absolutely cheery. With his Witches Night starting out so well, Reynard felt a twinge of sympathy for the woodcutter's family, making their hungry way to Wadicourt in the rain, but he had things to do here.

He began by getting out the woodcutter's wedge and maul. Sitting Amber on the bed, he carefully cut the steel fetter off her ankle. Amber thanked him—but he did not stop there. Setting aside the wedge and maul, he started unlacing her bodice as well. Amber did not resist, merely murmuring, "This is way against the rules."

"Why so?" he asked. To Reynard it seemed absolutely natural, totally necessary in fact.

"It just is," Amber insisted, still not moving to stop him.

He slid his hand inside her dress, slipping the torn fabric off her shoulder. Soft white skin shone in the firelight. "But we are doing it anyway," he observed.

She glanced down at his hand on her breast. "Sure looks like it."

Then they kissed, slowly, rapturously, seeing no need to rush—not with a long rainy Witches Night ahead. When they finished kissing, he sat up in the semi-darkness, pulling his quilted doublet off over his head. Warm low light from the fire played across his body. He started to roll down his hose, but Amber stopped him before he got to the knee. "First you must listen to my story. You do not have to believe it, but you must hear it anyway."

"That seems fair." Reynard had been trying to coax her story out of her almost since the moment they met. Had he only known this was the way, he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would have tried it sooner. Some women had to be bedded before they could bare their souls.

"I owe you my life," she told him, shuddering slightly at where she might be spending the night. "But I cannot make love to you without being totally honest. You must know who I am. My name is Amber Montana Dawn. I am not a witch. I am an MD-Ph.D. in Medical History at the University of Montana, specializing in the epidemic diseases. My students call me Dr. Dawn. But I like it when you say Amber."

"That does not make sense." Much as he wanted to make love, he felt touched by Amber's outlandish honesty. He could not just nod his head, claim he understood, then climb on top of her.

"I suppose it does not. But it is true. I come from the far future. Thousands of years from now, people are intensely curious about the past. For centuries, we pored over old records, and dug through ruins and cemeteries, searching for clues about the people who came before us. Finally we developed faster-than-light travel, allowing us to reach practically any point in space-time. Some folks took off to explore the far ends of the universe. Others, like me, wanted to see parts of space-time closer to home. Like here."

"Why?" He genuinely wanted to know.

"The more we know about our past, the more we know about ourselves. Or so I thought. Coming here has me questioning the whole concept."

"Well, I am glad you came." He slid his hand along her thigh, hiking up her dress, feeling the creamy smooth curve connecting her hip and buttocks. "Extremely so."

"But I was supposed to stay uninvolved," she protested.

"Uninvolved?" His hand stopped, resting atop the crease in her rear, set to pull her groin closer to his.

"I was supposed to observe, and study, but stay aloof. I was not supposed to treat children, or inoculate families, or tell anyone where I came from, or . . ." Amber looked at his hands on her flesh, and let her gaze drop.

"But that is impossible," he told her. How could she be here and not be involved? He remembered how she was with children. "Especially for you."

Amber sighed, "I suppose that is so." She certainly had shown no great success at it.

"*Exactement*." He used his free hand to slide her dress over her head, while he finished kicking off his own hose. He helped get her arms out of the torn dress, then pulled her to him. Amber gasped in surprise as their naked bodies came together.

"But there is more. . . ."

He stopped her explanations with a kiss. Reynard had heard her story—and even half-believed it. Whatever *else* Amber Montana Dawn MD-Ph.D. had to say could wait.

The Vicar-Inquisitor

Witches Night had never been so heavenly. Reynard awoke to hear someone speaking a language he did not know. It sounded like English, but made even less sense. ". . . 12.5 klicks, bearing ZERO-FOUR-THREE to you, global positioning SP737584. Pick-up . . ."

His eyes opened. Daylight flooded into the woodcutter's hut through the open door and the smoke hole over the hearth. He heaved himself up on an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

elbow, and saw Amber sitting naked by the door, mending her torn dress. A cat sat in the sunlight beside her, saying, ". . . remains on for 21:30, 27/8/46."

Seeing him rise up, the talking cat shot off, disappearing out the door of the hut.

Amber gave him a warm, *"Bonjour."* Got up, walked over, and kissed him good morning. Making him forget the talkative cat. Instead, he pulled her back into bed. "But I have not finished sewing up my dress," she protested.

"You will not need it," he promised.

He was right. But when they were done, she snagged her dress off the dirt floor and went back to work, mending the rents from her beating two days before. Her own bruises and cuts had vanished. Even up close, he could see no trace of them—not witchcraft perhaps, but nonetheless amazing.

"Now tell me about that cat," he told her.

Amber looked innocently about. "What cat?"

"The one you were talking to."

"Oh," her lips made a perfect circle. "That cat. He is smart, but he does not really talk."

"Not so anyone else can understand him."

"He has a collar with an audio-visual command hook-up. A human operator signals him instructions and speaks through the collar."

More words he did not understand. "So what was he saying?"

Amber sighed, setting down her dress. Luminous brown eyes studied him intently. Her voice softened. "He was confirming that I will be picked up tomorrow evening, a few miles northeast of here. A faster-than-light ship will meet my team there—the type of craft they used to call UFOs. That is why I had to get across the Somme. Or I would have been trapped in this century."

"Picked up?"

"Taken back to my own time."

"Why?" Witch or no, he did not want her to go. When his wife died giving stillbirth, the pain was so great that he wanted no other woman close to him. But Amber Montana Dawn was like no woman he had ever met. And now he would lose her too.

"Because our task is over. My whole team is going back to the future."

"So I will not see you again?"

She reached out and stroked his hair. "Not unless you come with me."

"Come with you?" Why would he ever want to do that?

"It is possible. You may well want to, when you have heard my story." She heaved a heavy sigh, and he felt her body tense.

"You sound like you are about to break another rule?"

"Big time!" Tears welled up in her eyes. "One I never thought I would break. But I will break it for you. You saved my life, risking yourself to spare me. You care incredibly, even for those you do not know. For nameless serfs whose farms are looted. For foreign strangers you find upon the road. Like me, or that Welshman they hung."

Like you care for every little child you meet? Women do love to remake men in their own image. "What is this momentous secret you are hiding?" What could she be doing that was so unspeakable? Two days ago she was ready to go to the stake rather than tell. Even now, it had her almost sobbing. "Just tell me. It cannot be that horrible. . . ."

She wiped her eyes. "It *is* that horrible, but I will tell." Amber rose up, squaring her shoulders, sitting naked on the straw mattress, looking serious, face set, eyes level.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A little over a year from now, in October 1347, a Genoese ship will dock in the harbor of Messina in Sicily. The men aboard will already be dying from a disease called the Black Death. Bubonic plague. In days, the plague will spread to the people of Messina. In two months, it will reach Marseilles. By March, it will be in Avignon. By the summer of 1348, the plague will be in Paris, along with an even more virulent pneumonic form of the disease. Everywhere it goes, people will die by the thousands. At Avignon, the graveyards will overflow, until corpses are thrown straight into the Rhone. Half of Paris will die. Monasteries will be emptied. Whole villages will be wiped out."

He listened intently, watching her tears return, hardly believing what he was hearing.

She went on quietly, eyes downcast. "The plague will die down in the winter of 1348-49, making people think it is gone. But in the spring, it will break out again in Paris, and spread here to Picardy. Before the plague has run its course, it will have spread from India to Iceland, killing close to a third of the world's population."

"We must try to stop that ship," he told her.

"What?" She looked up at him.

"The plague ship that will arrive in Messina. We must turn it away, or better yet, sink it at sea."

She replied with a weak smile, "It does not work that way. The plague is already loose in the Crimea, where the ship started from. If it does not get here aboard that particular ship, it will find another way. You cannot stop a continent-wide pandemic by sinking one hapless ship."

"Then why are you here?"

"There are an immense number of things we do not know about the Black Plague. Why did it come when it did? Was the population especially susceptible? Why were there pockets of immunity in places like Bohemia? I even managed to get a blood sample from Blind King John," she added proudly. "But most of all, we needed a baseline, some notion of Europe's state-of-health a year before the plague hit. Blood and diet samples from humans and rats. Also lice and fleas."

"Why rats? Why fleas?" He remembered her tiny glass vials still hidden in his saddle bag, filled with filth and vermin.

"Does sound disgusting," she confessed, "but the bubonic part of the plague is borne by rats and fleas. Collecting them is not as horrible as it sounds. Other things are far harder."

"Like what?" Harvesting diseased fleas off dying rats was lower than Reynard ever hoped to go.

"Seeing people and *knowing* that so many of them will die, especially when they could be saved! That is one reason they gave us the wands. There is a vaccine for the plague, and anyone we inoculate is safe. It gives us a feeling that we are doing some good—otherwise, we would go mad. But there are only a dozen team members, spread throughout Europe. When the plague comes, the few we save will barely be noticed."

And for saving a precious few, people wanted to burn her alive. Reynard saw the hopelessness of it. Even he had been furious when she touched him with the wand.

"And there is worse," Amber added softly.

"Worse? Lady, what you have told me is bad enough!" Bad beyond belief.

"That is why I want you to come with me. There is no future for you here. France will be devastated, and not just by the plague. This war with the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

English will last a hundred years. France will suffer defeat after defeat. When the king himself is captured, the peasants will blame the nobility and rise up in a huge *Jacquerie* like none ever seen before. Manors and castles will be sacked. Serfdom will collapse. All capped by a return of the Black Death—a Children's Plague this time, killing those born since the plague first appeared."

He sat stunned, listening to birds in the sunlit woods outside, hearing that his world was coming to a horrible end—from a woman who was recklessly honest in everything she did. Amber reached over and took his hand, "Come with me tomorrow night. You freed me. I owe you this chance to escape catastrophe. Please, please come home with me!"

Amber thought all this would truly happen. He heard it in her voice, felt it in her touch. She was genuinely relieved to no longer be concealing her terrible secret. Honesty meant a lot to Amber, and she had always told him the truth—just not all of it. Until now.

"I will think about it," he promised. "It is not something I can easily say yes or no to."

"I know." Amber squeezed his hand.

He watched her go back to mending her dress, smiling at him between stitches, totally unconscious of her nudity, just hoping to make him happy. She was a woman like none he had ever known. Smart, brave, and fiercely honest, without pettiness or artifice, only wanting to do right—at any cost. Whatever happened, he vowed not to lose her. Right now, she thought herself headed home, and he felt content to humor her. She did not know that she was already in his native Ponthieu, on his own land. Or that his manor of Fontaine-sur-Maye lay just beyond the wood. Once there, he could do as he wished. Her rendezvous was tomorrow night. Miss it, and she was his.

Things in King Philip's France could not possibly be as bad as she made out. Reynard believed this Black Death was coming. But Amber had said her wand would protect anyone it touched. Fontaine-sur-Maye could be one of those "pockets of immunity" she talked about. Like Bohemia. And as for the English beating them, he would believe that when he saw it. So far King Edward had shown him nothing but a spotless pair of heels.

"There," she shook out her dress. "Done." She slipped it over her head, standing up and holding out her arms. "What do you think?"

He looked her over. "I like better what you were wearing before."

She laughed, lacing her bodice. "Get up, get dressed."

"Why?" He was more interested in getting her back into bed.

She tied on her apron. "You will see. Get dressed, but not your armor—that would not be fair."

Mystified, he pulled on his hose, shirt, and quilted doublet. "And your wooden over-shoes," she told him, donning her own shoes and stockings. He obeyed, putting on the wooden "pattens" meant to keep his armored feet out of the mud. "Here, I will even let you have the gloves." Handing him his riding gloves, she sat back on the bed, her cards in hand. "I am going to teach you a new game."

"Yet another card game?" His mind was on other amusements.

"One you will really like," she promised.

He sat back on the bed, feeling silly wearing wooden over-shoes, gloves, and his quilted doublet. "What is this game called?"

"Strip poker. One-eyed jacks and suicide kings are wild." Amber was right, he did like it—even though she beat him by a pair of stockings.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rain returned while they played, falling on and off all morning. It was well into the afternoon before it let up enough for them to leave. As they mounted up, the woodcutter and his family appeared, wet and hungry, not having hiked to Wadicourt after all, merely huddling in the woods waiting to get their hovel back. Amber got out her wand, and the family submitted to inoculations with good grace, happy just to have their home again. Reynard did not see much to fear from Jacques like these. But they were his own Ponthieu tenants. Not ignorant Picards.

Tossing them a *franc d'or* for their troubles, he set out, happy to be in his own woods with Amber riding behind him, her arms about his waist. He took his time winding between the trees, not telling Amber where they were headed, hoping to make their arrival at Fontaine-sur-Maye a surprise. If they arrived just at vespers, stopping for supper would seem utterly natural. Amber would not know the manor was his until the gate swung shut behind her. Once he had her in his hall, and in his bed, he would deal with this Black Death—which would not reach Ponthieu for two years or more. Hopefully she would forgive him for keeping her. And the good Amber did with her wand would make up for her never going home.

Leaves rattled overhead, as if the rain had returned. Wishing he had brought a cloak, Reynard looked up. Instead of rain, he saw that the oak boughs were full of crows, flapping and preening, turning the branches black with their dark bodies.

Vespers bells had not yet tolled when they reached the edge of the woods. Beyond the forest of Crécy, the land rose up into rolling downs, forming a low undulating plateau dotted by a tiny square of villages—Wadicourt, Estrées, Fontaine-sur-Maye, and Crécy, each barely visible behind its belt of elms and fruit trees. Between the forest and the fields ran a little stream, the Maye, from which Reynard took his name.

As he emerged from the trees, Reynard made out the smoking ruin of his manor house. Horrified, he reined in. The grand manse where he meant to spend the night had been burned to cinders. Gates hung off their hinges, and his horse paddocks and sheep folds stood empty. His ancestral manor had been thoroughly looted, and whatever had not been stolen had been put to the torch.

He did not need to ask who did this. The low ridge between Crécy and Wadicourt was black with troops, great blocks of armored spearmen, flanked by wedges of archers sheltered behind ditches and stakes. King Edward's English army stood at bay, finally ready to offer battle.

Amber gave a startled gasp behind him, arms tightening about his waist. For once, she was as surprised as he. As they watched, more troops lurched onto the field, coming up the road from Abbeville. Recognizing the banners of the Royal Vanguard, he told her, "Get down."

"Why?" She held him even tighter.

"Because I am going to go into battle, which will be dangerous enough without you hanging onto Cupid's crupper."

"No, I will not let you." There was a wild, hopeless tone in her voice, a fierce determination he had not heard before.

Reynard tried to reason with her, "Come, I must go. And you clearly cannot go with me."

She shook her head. "You do not understand, you will be massacred. The English are going to cut you to pieces."

That hardly seemed likely. The Abbeville road was black with troops,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

French men-at-arms, German mercenaries, Genoese crossbowmen, and commune militia, easily outnumbering the English. He told her, "You are the one who does not understand. I must join this fight. Those blackened ruins are all that remains of my patrimony."

"You are lord of this manor?" Amber sounded roundly shocked. Was it so hard to believe he was a lord?

"I am Reynard de Maye, *seigneur* de Fontaine. This is my land, these are my woods, I was born by this stream."

She started to sob. "Why did you not tell me?"

Because I thought you were a witch, and I would probably have to see you burned—he thought that, but did not say it. Instead, he tried to make it sound like a mischance. "It did not seem necessary." She had certainly kept her own secrets.

"Please, please," she begged him. "Please come away with me. If you go into this battle, you will be killed!"

"Not if I can help it," he tried to sound confident.

"But you cannot help it," she insisted. "This is going to be a historic defeat, with a huge long list of dead. Reynard de Maye, *seigneur* de Fontaine, is on that list. If I had known that was you, and that this was where we were headed, I never would have let you leave that cottage."

Cold shivers descended his spine. Everything Amber said so far had come true. Blanque Taque. Their success at the ford. King Edward's march to Noyelles. Still he shook his head, saying grimly, "If I am dead, I am dead. What else can I do?"

"No, you are *not* dead." She clung hard to his armored back. "Not if you come away with me! You will merely be missing, and listed as dead."

Pulling off his riding gloves, he took her hands in his, gently prying them off his armor. "Dead or alive, I must go into this battle. This is the fief of my fathers, the land I was born on. Knights have come from far and wide to defend it." He thought of King John of Bohemia. The man was stone blind, but sure to be in the thick of it. "How can I do less?"

Her fingers twined with his, trying desperately to hold on. "What will that matter when you and they are dead? When this land is English for years and years to come?"

"But it *will* matter," he told her softly. "My duty is to defend this land, even to the death. Back down now, and my whole life is a lie."

Her hands relaxed. "Yes, I know. There are things we must do, no matter what, things so much a part of us that *not* to do them would deny our being." The threat of burning had not kept her from vaccinating children. He could not turn away now, no more than she could stop her healing.

He kissed her, and she slid down off Cupid's rump, still managing to keep her hands in his. "Wait for me here," he told her. "Keep out of sight. When this is over, I swear to take you to your rendezvous." He had no manor hall to keep her in now.

She nodded in silent agreement. But her look said she thought this was good-bye for good. Amber did not believe he would be back. She did not cry, instead her face softened and she looked up at him as if she meant to memorize every line. Vespers bells tolled across the *Vallée des Clercs*, the dip in the plateau that separated the two armies.

Reynard let go of her hands, untied his saddle bag and handed it to her—no sense taking her things into battle. Then he took up his reins and rode off, splashing through the stream he was named for, and climbing the heights

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beyond. The banks of the Maye were packed with commune militia and excited peasants, cheering him as he rode by, waving swords and crying, "Kill! Kill!"—while being careful not to get too close to the English themselves.

Passing the blackened ruins of Fontaine Hall, he found the Royal Vanguard forming up on the low plateau between Estrées and Fontaine-sur-Maye. Grimaldi had his Genoese crossbowmen in front, looking none too happy about the coming battle, saying the rain had soaked their bowstrings. "We are in no condition to fight," protested the Italian.

"Then why are you?" Reynard snapped back, anxious to find his five lances.

"King Philip called a halt to wait for the entire army to come up, but no one halted. Each new contingent crowded ahead of us, wanting to camp closest to the English. Comte d'Alençon kept ordering us forward—so here we are, going into battle whether anyone wills it or not."

Typical. The Comte must still smart from having missed the looting at Blanque Taque. Reynard looked about for the Bohemian banners. His five lances were most likely with Blind King John, unless they had the sense to go home.

"And he hung your Welshman."

"What?" He turned back to the Italian.

"Comte d'Alençon hung your Welshman. I tried to stop him," Grimaldi explained, "but . . ."

Reynard nodded. D'Alençon would see them all dead at this rate. He told the Italian. "I go to see King John."

But he did not go anywhere. Comte d'Alençon's armored cavalry was pressing on the Genoese foot bowmen, forcing them down into the *Vallée des Clercs*. As he struggled to maintain his place on the slope, the sky suddenly darkened. Clouds blotted out the sun, and a great flock of crows rose from the trees, cawing in alarm. Rain poured down around him, completely drenching the crossbowmen's strings. Hopefully, it would play havoc with those big English bows as well.

As quickly as it came, the rain passed on, and the August sun blazed down on men's frightened faces. "A good sign," cried Grimaldi, "we will drive them off that ridge, like sunlight drives away the rain."

Nothing sounds hollower than an omen read wrong. Reynard watched the Genoese advance toward the English. Reaching crossbow range, they gave a great shout, hoping to scare the English on the slopes above. The English did not deign to answer. Again they shouted. Again no answer from the silent mass atop the sunlit ridge. A third shout, and they fired their sodden crossbows.

Reynard saw the English archers take a silent step forward, and loose their arrows. Cloth yard shafts rained down on the Genoese, piercing limbs and armored jackets, nailing helmets to their heads. In seconds, the Italians had turned about, throwing down their crossbows and streaming back up the slope in terror. So much for rain spoiling the big English bows.

Instead of opening ranks to let the Italians through, Comte d'Alençon's cavalry surged forward, plunging into the hail of arrows, riding down their own retreating infantry. Fighting not to be swept downslope, Reynard heard Comte d'Alençon crying out, "Kill these scoundrels, they block our way. . . ."

French knights hacked at the horrified Italians, caught between their own allies and the English arrows. Reynard forced his way back through the press, toward the Bohemian banners atop the hill. He found Blind King

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

John eager for the fight, with a knight on either side of him, their saddles chained to his, set to lead their suicidal king into the fray. "How goes the battle?" King John asked heartily.

Reynard glanced back into the valley below, where the French men-at-arms slashed at their own infantry, while English arrows fell upon them both, cutting down crossbowmen and toppling knights from their saddles. Except for one weak volley from rain soaked crossbows, the English had not as yet been scratched. "Well enough," Reynard replied. If King John's great desire was to die in battle, he should have no trouble doing it today.

"Splendid!" King John declared, drawing his sword. Having a blind man leading the Vanguard no longer seemed so boldly flamboyant. If the King of Bohemia could have seen the chaos in the *Vallée des Clercs,* perhaps he could have pulled the French army back from the brink. But that was not even a possibility. Effective command fell into the uncertain hands of the Comte d'Alençon, happily cutting down his own bowmen—a dubious tactic at best, and hardly likely to hearten the troops behind him.

Reynard asked the Germans, "Has anyone see my Ensign?"

"Not I," laughed the blind King. Nor had any of the others.

Just as well. Reynard could tell that Amber was right; this would be an epic catastrophe. He hoped that his men had headed back to their hearths and homes. They had no reason to die here. He, however, was already home. As a boy, he had played at war in the valley below. Facing the real thing, he already wished that he had listened to Amber. Looking back along the Abbeville road, he saw the Oriflamme flying over the swelling host, the sacred red banner of the Abbey of Saint Denis—a sign that quarter would not be asked or given.

Unable to wait any longer, Blind King John ordered his knights forward. Trumpets blared. Reynard grimly put on his helmet, tightening his chin strap. He had no lance, but that hardly mattered. This was not war, but absolute idiocy. No attempt was made to coordinate the attack, or even clear a path through the carnage ahead. Instead, the Germans plunged forward, lances leveled, banners snapping above them, riding right over their own dead and wounded, straight into the oncoming arrows. As they reached the bottom of the dip, and started up the far slope, Reynard saw the Comte d'Alençon lying dead among the despised Genoese. Brought down by the bows he had disdained.

But it was too late for Comte d'Alençon's death to do any good. King Philip's army had become a leaderless mass, with the rear ranks pressing the front ranks forward. King Philip himself was somewhere to the rear, unable to see what was happening ahead. King Edward's banners stood beside a big windmill atop the low ridge, and the great armored mass of French chivalry would keep charging at that windmill—until they broke through the enemy line, or the English ran out of arrows.

Through his narrow helmet slit, Reynard saw arrows raining down around him, hardly able to miss amid the packed mass. Knights hunched forward in their saddles, heads down, just like they were riding into a real rain. Horses had the worst of it, being the biggest targets. Showing more sense than their masters, stricken mounts refused to take the bit, rearing and plunging, shying sideways, or backing right away from the arrows, crashing into other horses coming up behind them. Higher up the slope, some knights seemed to actually be in among the English, trading blows with dismounted men-at-arms in front of the flailing windmill.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He felt a stab of pain. Looking down, he saw an arrow sprouting from his thigh, cutting through his leg and two layers of armor, its point buried in his wooden saddle. Horrified, he reached down to break off the shaft. Another arrow rang against his helmet, knocking it askew. He could no longer see the shaft in his thigh, but he felt it there, pinning his leg to the saddle. He was mildly surprised that it did not hurt more.

Cupid must have been hit as well, maybe by the same arrow. Backing and rearing, the big mail-clad Frisian ignored the bit, flinging Reynard sideways. Only the arrow through his thigh kept him from being thrown out of the saddle. His staggering mount stumbled, righted himself, then toppled thrashing to the ground. Reynard got his helmet turned about in time to see wet earth leap up at him.

He hit hard, knocking his breath away. Cupid tried to rise, almost tearing Reynard's pinned leg from its socket, then crashed back down, to lie dead on top of him. Inside his steel helmet, Reynard sobbed for his horse, who deserved better than this.

All he could see through his narrow helmet slit was a blue bar of sky. Arrows continued to rain down. He felt them thud into his dead horse. Then, in a burst of pain an arrow hit him in the side, slicing through his armor. His cry of agony was lost in the general tumult of sobs, screams, shouted prayers and saint's names. A new wave of French knights galloped over him, blocking out his bar of sky, crying, "*Montjoye Saint Denis!*" and showering him with clods and dirt. Reynard reached around, snapped off the shaft in his side, then fainted from shock.

He awoke in the dark of his helmet. Things felt strangely still. Arrows had stopped falling. His pain had subsided. Gray clouds filled the bar of sky in his helmet slit. Trumpets blared behind him. He tried to rise, bumping into something heavy. Pain shot through his body, and he slumped back down, remembering he was pinned beneath Cupid.

His helmet now faced upslope, toward the invisible English. He could see his own sword arm stretched out on the ground in front of him, somehow still clutching his sword. Cupid's black mailed flank looked like a pin cushion. Nearby, a German knight lay on the ground, his helmet adorned with black ostrich feathers—one of the knights chained to Blind King John. King John of Bohemia had gotten his wish to die in battle, just as Amber had predicted.

Amber saw all this coming and tried desperately to warn him—now it was too late. Trumpets blared again. Somewhere behind him, French knights were forming up for another charge.

He heard someone moving among the dead and dying. Ghost-like, a figure loomed up in the half-light, then disappeared almost at once, bending down out of sight. But he reappeared immediately, coming closer, pausing to bend over every few feet. Reynard recognized another red-faced, lumpish Welshman—looking like a brother to the one he had tried to save—wearing a steel cap and chain mail shirt, and carrying a bloody dagger and a bundle of arrows. He was picking up spent arrows, and slitting the throats of the wounded.

Trumpets blared behind him. The Welshman glanced up, then kept coming, stooping to pull arrows out of Cupid's black flank. When the witless idiot jerked on the shaft in his leg, Reynard groaned. Turning about, the Welshman tucked his arrows under his arm, bending down with his dagger to finish Reynard off.

Putting all his remaining strength into his right arm, Reynard drove his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sword up under the Welshman's mail skirt, pushing the point deep inside the man's thigh. Blood splashed everywhere as the fellow toppled out of sight. Reynard heard thrashing, then everything was still again.

He sank back, satisfied with the first blow he had struck all day. What novel tactics; ride down your own infantry, get riddled with arrows, then lie waiting for them to come and slit your throat—by then the most timid foe could not help but underestimate you! Not exactly knightly, but as good as anything he had seen done on his side today.

Another French charge swept over him, with more cries of, "*Montjoye Saint Denis!*" More dirt rattled off his armor. He could picture what was happening. As each new French contingent came up the Abbeville road, rounding the corner of the woods and mounting the plateau, they saw the English army waiting beneath the windmill on the far ridge—but not the wreckage of previous charges lying in the *Vallée des Clercs*. They simply lowered their lances and charged.

Lying there, he lost count of the charges, which went on well after dark. By then, newly arrived contingents could see nothing of the carnage, and kept on coming until they collided with the English—who Reynard now knew were never going to run out of arrows. Finally, he fainted again.

He awoke in quiet blackness. By now the battle must be over. Nothing stirred, not even Welshmen refilling their quivers. In the dank chill of his helmet, drops of sweat seemed to take forever to drip down his forehead. He lay for a long time listening to his own heartbeat, then a low scurrying came out of the dark, followed by the scrape of tiny claws on armor.

Rats. He hated how they always came after a battle. Especially at night. Crows by day were ghastly, but you could always look away. Rats at night could not be ignored, scuttling about, gnawing on corpses. Bivouacking near a battlefield was gruesome, bleeding to death on one even worse.

Too weak to swing his sword, he felt a rat nosing its way along his side, feeling for a chink in his armor. Invisible in the darkness, it crawled up his armored sleeve, sniffing at the roundel on his armpit, headed for the gap between his helm and neck mail. He could not even turn his head to scare it off.

Without warning, a large cat leaped out of the darkness, landing on his chest armor. The rat vanished. Padding up his chest, the cat peered into his helmet slit. "*Pardon, seigneur,*" the cat spoke with a husky man's voice, "breathe and lie still. Help is on the way."

Reynard waited, listening to the cat purr on his chest. Footsteps came out of the dark, headed his way. Lifting its head, the cat meowed loudly, and a thin beam of light pierced the blackness, guiding the footsteps. As they drew closer, Reynard recognized the clump of wooden sabots. A figure loomed up out of the blackness carrying the thin bright light, looking worse than the Welshman he'd stabbed. It was the one-eyed Rat Catcher.

"*Bonsoir, seigneur,* let me help you up." Bending down, the Rat Catcher unlaced Reynard's helmet and pressed something cold to his neck. He felt a familiar hiss and tickle. Pain vanished. Warmth started to return to his limbs. Getting up, the Rat Catcher cut Cupid's saddle cinches and broke off the arrow shaft embedded in Reynard's leg. Then he carefully lifted up the armored limb, freeing Reynard from the saddle.

Showing amazing body strength, the one-eyed Jacques shouldered aside the dead mail-clad horse, then picked up Reynard, armor and all—carrying him out of the *Vallée des Clercs,* up the slope toward Fontaine-sur-Maye. The cat padded after them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Amber was waiting amid the ruins of his manor hall, where he had meant to keep her. The Rat Catcher laid him at her feet. "Is he alive?" she asked, bending down to look at his wounds.

"Somewhat," replied the Rat Catcher, unlacing Reynard's helmet. "Let us have a closer look." He lifted his eye-patch, revealing a set of shining lenses held in place by the patch strap. Little soft-green lights flicked on, ringing the eye-piece. He leaned down to look at the arrow wound in Reynard's side.

"Do not worry," Amber whispered. "This is Georges René Dubonnet, Doctor of Antique Medicine at the Sorbonne. He will save you."

"Save me?" he whispered, looking at the blackened ruins rearing over him in the pre-dawn light. It hardly seemed possible, when his whole world was dying. "How?"

"With ease," the Rat Catcher assured him, probing about in the wound. "Just a little laser surgery. You have lost a deal of blood from a perforated intestine, and a nicked liver, but no other major organs are damaged. I have given you antibiotics and local anesthetic. Now I will operate to stop the internal bleeding, remove the arrowhead, patch your intestine, then sew up your wounds."

"What then?" he asked, not understanding half of what the Sorbonne Rat Catcher was saying.

Amber took his head in her lap. "Then I am taking you back to Montana." He lay back, closing his eyes, too weak to argue.

By dawn, he did feel better. Sitting in his blood-stained hose and doublet by the ruins of Fontaine hall, he had an IV drip in his arm, supported by a sword scavenged from the field. Sea fog filled the hollows, hiding all sign of the massacre. Spread out on the ground before him were a few scorched relics of his previous life—some hawk bells, a favorite carving knife, and a drinking cup. The English army stood all alone on its cloud-draped ridge, looking not a whit reduced from yesterday. There was no sign of the French host that had assailed it, just a few late-arriving levies of Beauvias and Rouen, searching in vain for King Philip's army.

Out of the mist came a column of Norman knights headed by the fighting Archbishop of Rouen and the Grand Prior of the Hospitallers. At the Archbishop's side rode his Vicar-Inquisitor, wearing plate and mail and armed with a mace—a cleric's weapon, since priests were not to shed blood. Recognizing Reynard, he called down, "Chevalier de Maye, it is good to see you."

Reynard nodded, wishing he could say the same.

The Vicar-Inquisitor stared at the bag of synthetic blood hanging from the upright sword, dripping through a tube into Reynard's arm. Then he looked at the Rat Catcher, and at Amber sitting in her black dress, with the cat in her lap, calmly shuffling her cards—not the least perturbed at finally facing the Vicar-Inquisitor. The armored cleric cleared his throat. "Comte d'Alençon sent word that you have caught a witch for me."

"Did he indeed?" Reynard hated to outright lie to a priest. Wincing in pain, he pulled the drip out of his arm and struggled to his feet. "Well, she is not for you."

"Why so?" The Vicar-Inquisitor looked taken aback. "Under the law, you must render her to me or suffer for it."

"Maybe in Rouen. But you are not in Normandy anymore. Thanks to God, this is Ponthieu and my own manor of Fontaine-sur-Maye." Such as it was.

The Inquisitor glared down at him. "Beware, my Lord, the Comte d'Alençon will hear of this, and have something to say."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

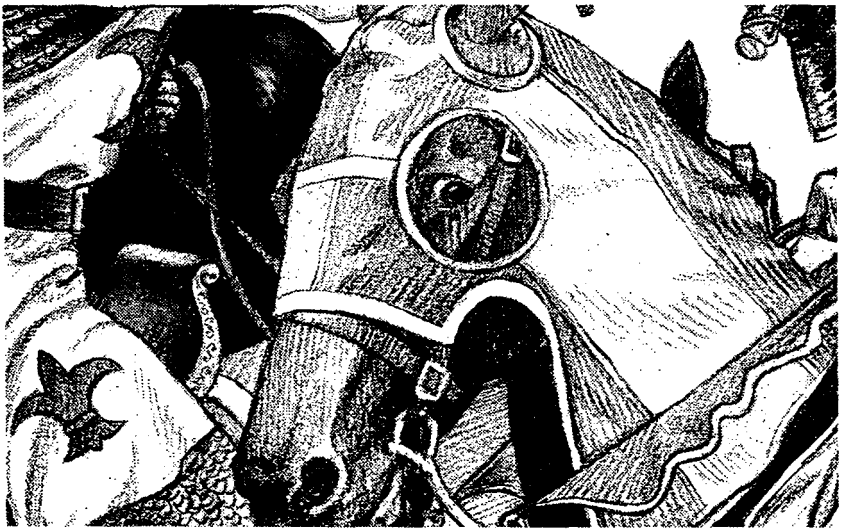
Reynard smiled grimly. "That I very much doubt."

"Do not presume too much," the Inquisitor warned him. "Once we have finished with the English, we will deal with your wanton Godless attitude."

Reynard looked over at the English, waiting beneath their windmill, on the far side of the foamy white sea filling the *Vallée des Clercs*. Below that fog lay the King of Bohemia and the Comte d'Alençon, along with the King of Majorca and over a thousand lesser lords and knights. Plus an uncounted number of commoners. "By all means, deal with the English first. I would not stand in your way."

When the Normans came flying back in full retreat—pursued by flights of arrows and the Earls of Suffolk and Northumberland—they saw no sign of Chevalier Reynard de Maye, *seigneur* de Fontaine and his wanton Godless attitude. Nor of his two ragged companions.

Not that they stopped to look. O



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The author's most recent book, *Marrow*, is just out from Tor. In his action-packed new story, Mr. Reed takes a terrifying look at what happens . . .

WHEN IT ENDS

Robert Reed

Illustration by Alan Giana

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A premonition wakes you from the perfect sleep.

Wakes you and leaves you feeling a cold thickness lodged against the back of your throat. What time is it? The heart of night, your personal clock tells you. For a groggy moment, you consider dropping back to sleep. But a platoon of personal links sense ambivalence in your spirit, and again the premonition comes to you. Warns you. The world's ethereal net whispers to your unconscious, telling you, "Something has happened. And it is awful." Then the thickness in your throat worsens, threatening to choke you, forcing you to muster the strength and simple will to sit up.

After a deep breath, you climb down from your mesh-bed, and, in the most cursory fashion, dress.

Home is small and simple, even for a colony world. Barely ten rooms, only half of which are linked to the net. As you step into your dining room, the marble walls vanish. Before you stands a podium carved from a sulfurous diamond and drenched in a fierce tropical light. You blink for a moment. The angle of the sun tell you where this is: Continent Beautiful—the opposite end of the world. Turning in a quick circle, you absorb the famous skyline of Landfall City, a hundred imposing buildings of butter-steel and crystal trying to obscure each other and the turquoise sky.

This is the seat of government.

Fifteen million humans live in the City, with a billion others scattered across three continents and the oceans between.

A familiar voice thanks the world for coming on such short notice.

The president stands behind the podium. A tall and handsome woman, she has a natural presence augmented with holomake-up and decades of practice. She understands how to stand before an audience. With a stern look and a grim little smile, she conveys volumes. Gripping the yellowed diamond, she again thanks everyone for coming. Ninety-eight point three percent attendance, your links tell you. Which leaves you disappointed, frankly. What sort of citizen would avoid such an important meeting?

The president's smile flickers, fades.

With a quiet strong voice, she announces, "Moments ago, I learned that our world is in grave peril. An automated cargo shuttle has been disabled. A catastrophic impact with a dormant comet has left it without functioning AIs or a workable drive system. The shuttle is a rogue, in essence. With a cargo of transuraniums, it has the resting mass of a class-two asteroid. And it is traveling at half the velocity of light."

As a murmur spreads through the world's net, everyone anticipates the next words, a communal panic taking shape.

Soberly, sadly, the president admits, "Every simulation run over the last five minutes shows the rogue impacting with Hoggins' World."

This dear planet, she means.

"It will happen," she adds, "in another fifty-three hours."

Nearly a billion voices mutter, "Shit."

The president seems to be staring only at you, explaining, "Most simulations place the impact near the center of the Gorgeous Continent."

Each awful vision is made available for public perusal and digestion. The shuttle was suppose to make a close flyby of your sun, tweaking its course without approaching Hoggins' World. But bad luck has changed all of that. With a numbing horror, you realize that your house and grounds will be vaporized in the first moments after the impact.

"We are upgrading our planetary defenses," the president assures. "But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

honestly, there is no chance of success. We've had too little warning, and no one has seriously anticipated this kind of danger. This is very much a one-in-a-trillion accident. Many should be blamed, but blame is a luxury now. We haven't the time."

Frank words from your pragmatic leader.

"Over these next hours, my office will do everything it can to help you survive the coming horror." The woman shows a strong, determined grin, then concludes by saying, "I wish you luck. And regardless of the outcome, I pray that from this moment, each of us will carry himself and herself with grace and honor . . . toward whatever our fate should be . . ."

Of course a good life should be long and it should be happy. And challenges should be interwoven into long periods of carefree pleasure.

In every sense, this has been a rude awakening.

You quickly say good-bye to your home and most of your possessions. Your AIs—obedient but far from insane—openly remind you that they are small machines, and if you wish, you could physically pry them from the walls and carry them off. But while you are grateful for their help and friendship, you have to remind them that they are machines and fairly cheap ones at that. And their combined size and energy demands are simply too much. You'd have to pick and choose among them, and what sort of person could do that?

An hour is spent loading your four-wing with real necessities. Your on-hand stock of compressed and mummified food will only last for a month. Assuming that you survive the impact, of course. More important are biosynthesizers that can turn steam and ash—two future resources—into palatable feasts and flavorless water. Most important are the baby tokamaks that will power whatever else you bring. Two babies, or three? It's a quandary. You decide on just two of them. Then after distracting most of your AIs with impossible math problems, you add a very grateful engineering AI to your tools.

The clothes synthesizer is a small portable model.

During the coming years, distractions will be important. Even precious. You quickly assemble all those holos and books and bottled dreams and virtual dramas that you've been meaning to enjoy for the last few decades.

After a final walk-through of the house, you blot away the tears and climb onboard the four-wing, and the ship lifts off slowly, then hovers in the predawn gloom, knowing to give you a few moments more to stare down at your doomed home.

Only then do you call your latest lover.

"Are you ready?" you blurt out.

Remarkably, she's lying in bed, half-asleep and perfectly relaxed.

"Darling," you say, "why aren't you packing?"

She isn't as attractive as some of your lovers, or any past wife. But there is a quality about her face, particularly in her eyes, that always intrigues you. With a sturdy slow voice, she says, "I'm not going."

"But you've got to. In fifty hours, everything here's going to be obliterated!"

A horrible, perfect word.

Obliterated.

Without tenderness, she says your name. She says it as a warning, then lets her mouth fall open. For a long, long moment, it seems as if she's ready to say something more. Something important. But then she decides other-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wise, shaking her head slowly, disgust mixed with a strange resignation, her mouth pulling itself shut again.

"I know what you're thinking," you tell her. "There's no hope. We're beaten, and dead, and why bother trying to run?"

She says nothing. Watching you.

But you care for her. That's why you make optimistic sounds, explaining, "The Lovely Continent is our best hope. There's a deep granite bed where we can dig bunkers. The government's already manufacturing drilling equipment on site, and every citizen and company with the same capacity has been asked—"

She interrupts, again saying your name.

"What?" you sputter. You growl. "If there's a 1 percent chance of survival, don't you think it's worth chasing?"

"Is that the official estimate? One percent?"

You don't know this person. How can she sound so ignorant, so uncaring? "No, it's more like a tenth of a percent. And that's if our lasers can vaporize enough of the rogue before it falls on *you*."

A moment of silence.

"I'm awfully tired," is how she answers you.

Then she abruptly severs the link, leaving it blocked at her end.

But you aren't tired, are you? Streaking across the darkened countryside, accompanied by thousands and millions of like-minded refugees, you find yourself awake, and alive, and despite everything that the cold numbers tell you, optimistic.

You will beat this thing, you sense.

In the end, if you do everything possible and do it right . . . victory is assured. . . !

Hours ago, this was a wilderness of cold pink rock wearing lichen and the occasional stand of walking-hard trees. In another century, this polar landscape would have been thickly forested and dotted with modest homes. But another future has intruded. Has invaded. Millions of four-wings and airboats and vacuum barges have arrived before you. Entire cities have splashed into existence. A tentative order has been imposed by government AIs and the discipline of the average citizen. As you approach, an authoritative voice directs you to one of the outlying cities. Little more than a village, really. Reserved for single people traveling alone. You are eighty-ninth in line to use a plasma drill that has yet to dig anyone's bunker. But you have a number, and a place to stand, and that helps culture your inexhaustible hopes.

Sometimes people find a friend or ex-lover in the crowd; otherwise, everyone here is a stranger to everyone else.

The next twenty hours is spent avoiding sleep, making yourself ready, and, many times, making new friends.

Everyone is scared. It shows in their faces, particularly in the bright, all-seeing eyes. You hear it in their voices, even when you can't make out the words. People accustomed to having all the time in the world are now speaking in crisp phrases and lone words. Sometimes, a gesture is enough. Time is precious; there's too much to do. Even waiting for the drill demands time and labor. How can you dig the bunker quickly? And deep enough, too? Four minutes is the mandatory dig-time, although that might change as circumstances warrant. In other words, three minutes might be the limit. Or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

two and a half. You and your engineering AI have to design and redesign your bunker, spinning detailed plans for room-sized chambers more than a kilometer beneath your toes—rooms sealed tight by ten different means, and linked to the net by three separate, well-hardened avenues.

And still the refugees pour across the sky.

Your little village is a city now, complete with named streets and decorations on every temporary shelter. Less than twenty-three hours remain when finally, after every imaginable delay, your neighborhood drill is built and operating. It begins by chiseling a deep, steeply angled shaft into the pink crust, then jumping in. Just short of the puddled magma, it throws out its spidery limbs and stops itself. Then with plans from the first three refugees, it carves the deepest bunkers, including access tunnels and the narrow veins where links can touch the outer world.

Almost the entire world is trying to hide beneath this remote ground.

It's amazing to realize just how little space a billion desperate bodies need. You say it, and everyone else says it, too.

"Amazing, and sobering," you tell your new friends.

And they are your friends. You can tell them anything, and they feel as free with you. Watching the last waves of refugees coming from the far north, everyone speaks with pity and polite scorn. There's no room for them here; they're being sent to lesser sites and newer cities where the granite isn't so thick or durable, and where the drills have barely begun to dig.

"The poor, slow souls," you tell each other. "We can live without them."

But then your own luck runs out. With only a quarter of the bunkers finished, your neighborhood drill falls into its self-repair mode, sending up word that it suffers from three separate failures, all terminal.

Three hundred new friends stare at each other.

What now? everyone asks with bright, terrified eyes.

Cooperation is essential. That much is accepted without question. Perhaps those with finished bunkers are thinking, "I can climb down and take mine and forget the others." But that kind of selfishness will be met with selfishness. You can't prepare for the end of the world while your closest friends are fighting you. Not only would you die, but you'd die looking like the fool.

Altruism stampedes into view.

Kindness is the main currency, the only source of genuine wealth.

One of the lucky seventy-five says, "I can take three others. Decided by lottery. You have thirty seconds to tell me if you want to play."

But within fifteen seconds, the lottery is canceled.

The other lucky seventy-four shrug, smiling gamely, and under the fierce pressure of social convention, they do what is right.

"There's room for everyone," everyone claims.

Conspicuously ignoring the doomed stragglers who still, at this incredibly late hour, continue to fly across the cloudless turquoise sky.

Barely three hours remain now.

A petite woman invites you inside her cramped bunker. Her reactors and AIs and various synthesizers and comforts crowd around you, while your prized possessions remain above, waiting to be obliterated. But that's only right, of course. Of course your life is more important than any property—an essential fact that you should have realized long ago.

If you live through the day, you will be a better person.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That's the vow you make to yourself, and surely with their own private voices, your bunkermates make their own solemn vows.

By chance, all of them are women.

One is ancient. She has the dark eyes and unnaturally smooth face that come after centuries, and her smile is wide and sturdy, and infectious. With a voice that has age as well as mass, she tells how it was when she first immigrated to Hoggins' World. When it was little more than rock and poisonous seas. She's one of the original colonists, which makes her a treasure. And makes this tragedy all the larger.

But she refuses to be bitter.

"We'll rebuild again," she tells the other women, and you. "Whatever it takes, and however long . . . we'll do it over again and do it better. I couldn't be more certain of anything, my darlings."

With two hours left, you cover the still-warm walls with three layers of foam. Each layer cures into a different substance. A bright diamond foam serves as armor. A supergel is the shock absorber. And the outer layer becomes a vacuum-boned ceramic insulator. If the granite melts around you, then the bunker will live on—a substantial bubble that will eventually bob to the surface of the magma sea. Which is where you will die, probably. No insulator is perfect, much less eternal. But there's always the remote, amazing chance that someone will find you in time, then save you.

With all that wondrous foam, the bunker is more crowded than ever.

The air is dark and a little stale already, and every breath tastes of scared women and one terrified man.

You busy yourselves with your links.

Images piped from deep space show you the renegade. The mindless monster. It's a blotch of blackness plunging from deepest space. Even when it moves closer to the sun, details are few. Lasers and bursts of plasma brighten it now and again. But as predicted, it's a tough piece of machinery, enduring the abuse without complaint or any serious change of direction.

With an hour left, the president makes her final speech:

"I wish all of us strength and composure. Remember. You are pioneers and the children of pioneers, and what you have accomplished here, in the past and today, will always be a testament to courage and your great worth."

Most of the world smiles.

Including you.

You make one last attempt to speak with your lover. But she stubbornly says nothing, her own links shorn off at the root.

With thirty minutes left, one of your bunkermates blurts, "Oh, look! No!"

Through her link, you watch the sky over Landfall City. Hundreds and thousands of shuttles and orbiting yachts are lifting off. Sensible as all cowards are, the wealthy have waited until the last moment to make their mistake. With everyone else underground, no one can stop them, or even scream loudly enough to be heard.

Is that where your lover is?

Was she asleep that morning and unconcerned because she had a berth waiting on one of those ships?

You feel a righteous anger.

And then, nothing.

It's enough for you to be with these women, sitting in this dark little hole, stripped of every possession and proud of your conduct over the last fifty-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

plus hours. Only minutes remain until the impact. Five minutes, and four, and three. And now you grip the small warm hands beside you, and the four of you watch the black pilotless ship holding its course, its motion tweaked slightly as it passes the largest moon, then beginning its great plunge into the heart of the Gorgeous Continent.

With despair and a threadbare hope, and simply because it feels so wonderful, you four cling to each other in the close, familiar darkness.

Hug, and kiss.

Then in the final instant, everyone cuts their links, taking a deep last breath and holding it for a few excruciating moments of perfect silence. And that's when a premonition stirs in each of you. Stirs until you pick up your links again, and look at your world.

The world intact, still.

And a carefully buried memory comes from within you. Quietly, almost shyly, it explains what you had forgotten intentionally, for the very best of reasons. . . .

To call it a game is to belittle it.

But your lover has to laugh, saying, "This was just a damned game," as she shakes her head, happy to have the chance to speak her mind. "Implanted memories and shaped forgetfulness, and I told you that I wasn't going to play. The night before, I told you. Do you remember that?"

Now. Yes.

"All that frantic, contrived panic," she says. "Not to mention the sheer waste. Of time. Of resources. Of everything."

I wait for a moment, then tell her, "It's not a game."

"'It's not a game.' That's what you always say."

"Because it's true." The history of the event is simple enough. Colony worlds face disaster from natural causes as well as humanmade ones. And bloodless drills and exercise can't begin to make a population ready to face real dangers. What's best is to believe that terrible things are happening. What works, and works on a thousand worlds, is to plan the occasional apocalypse, then let everyone play their tiny roles.

"It's an old, outdated exercise," your lover tells you. "We aren't a wilderness planet anymore. And these fake disasters are more entertainment than a serious rehearsal."

To call it entertainment is to sell the drama short.

You stare at her for a long, long moment. Then with a voice born from granite and darkness, you tell her, "I can't see you anymore. Not romantically, or any other way. This is good-bye."

"That's also what you told me . . . on the night before . . ."

"I don't remember," you admit.

"'This is good-bye.' That's exactly what you said."

"Well," you remark. And remembering to smile with a weak amusement, you add, "I must have really meant those words then. . . ."

You eventually sleep with two of your bunkermates.

That's normal enough. Countless romances had their beginnings underground, and the world's chapels and churches and favorite gardens are suddenly busy with weddings. In your case, the younger lover remains a close, trusted friend. But it's the older woman—the ancient, wise immigrant—who is special enough to marry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

No, this was not any mere game.

Or an entertainment.

But like all things vast and exciting, there is a spiritual element to this great undertaking. Every person has been changed in some tangible way. Revamped and revitalized, oftentimes, and in a few special cases, reborn.

Your own wedding is small, and quiet, and quite lovely.

Rumors coming from Landfall City claim that the next event, still decades away, will be the largest ever. A dozen worlds will convince themselves that some local sun is about to supernova; the entire district will have to mobilize. With that in mind, you promise your bride, "I will always be with you. Should the sky burn or the oceans freeze, I will be the one in whom you can trust your soul."

Your bride weeps, sobs.

Says, "And I'll always be with you, darling."

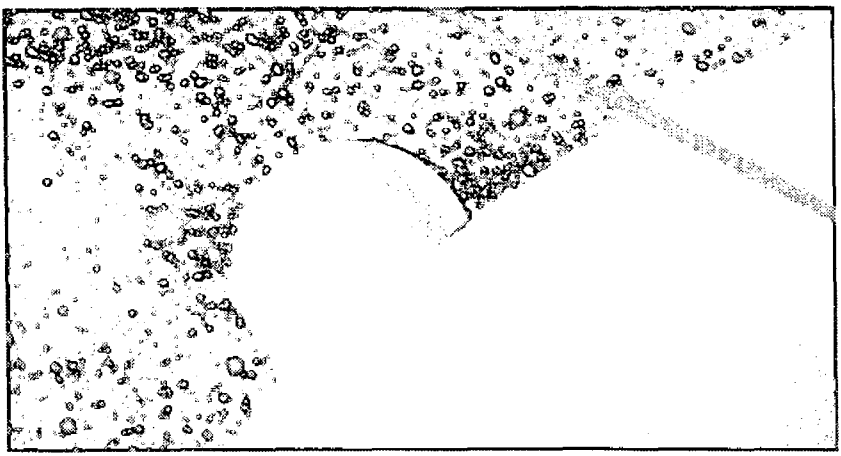
Your honeymoon takes place inside the familiar bunker.

With enough supplies to last a fat month, you close and seal the tunnels, then stare at one another in the flickering yellowy glow of a single candle. And together, in the same instant, you forget about the world outside. You forget that people are living above you, and that other couples are squeezed into the neighboring bunkers. Some vast and malicious disaster has killed every other human, you believe. No one exists anywhere in the universe but this one woman, and you. And now you bend at the waist, and with a single wet breath, suffocate the candle's flame.

Into that perfect newborn darkness, you reach.

As she reaches for you.

Sustained by that single incredible notion, the two of you make desperate love to each other . . . trying to start the first of a thousand babies . . . fighting impossible odds to fill this empty beautiful universe all over again. . . . O



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sometimes, drastic measures are needed . . .

TO CUDDLE AMY

Nancy Kress

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Campbell entered the living room to find his wife in tears. "Allison! What's wrong?"

She sprang up from the sofa and raged at him. "What do you think is wrong, Paul? What's *ever* wrong? Amy! Only this time she's gone too far. *This* time, she . . . she . . . the police just left. . . ." She broke down into sobs.

Campbell had had a lot of experience dealing with his wife. They'd been married almost forty years. Pushing down his own alarm, he took Allison in his arms and sat on the sofa, cradling her as if she were a child. Which, in some ways, she still was. Allison had always been high-strung, finely tuned. Sensitive. He was the strong one. "Tell me, sweetie. Tell me what happened."

"I . . . she . . ."

"The police. You said the police just left. What did Amy do now?"

"Van . . . vandalism. She and those awful friends of hers . . . the Hitchens boy, that slut Kristy Arnold . . . they . . ."

"They *what?* Come on, honey, you'll feel better if you tell me."

"They were throwing rocks at cars from the overpass! Throwing rocks!"

Campbell considered. It could be far worse. Still . . . something didn't add up here. "Allison—why did the cops leave? Are they going to arrest Amy?"

"No. They said they"—more sobbing—"couldn't be sure it was her. Not enough evidence. But they suspected it was, and wanted us to know . . . oh, Paul, I don't think I can take much more!"

"I know, honey. I know. Shhh, don't cry."

"She just throws away everything we do for her!"

"Shhhhhh," Campbell said, but Allison went on crying. Campbell gazed over her heaving shoulder at the wall, covered with framed photos of Amy. Amy at six months, asleep on a pink blanket in a field of daisies. Amy at two, waving her moo-cow, a toddler so adorable that people had stopped Allison in the street to admire her. Amy at seven in a ballet tutu. Amy at twelve, riding her horse. Amy at sixteen in a prom dress, caught in a rare smile.

Amy, fourteen, came through the front door.

Allison didn't give her daughter a chance to attack first. "So there you are! You just missed the cops, Amy, telling us what you've done *this* time, and it's the *last straw,* do you hear me, young lady? We forgave you the awful school grades! We forgave you the rudeness and ingratitude and sullen self-centeredness! We even forgave you the shop-lifting, God help us! But this is over the line! Throwing rocks at cars! Someone could have been killed—how much more do you expect us to *take* from you? Answer me!"

Amy said angrily, "I didn't do it!"

"You're lying! The cops said—"

"Allison, wait," Campbell said. "Amy, the cops said you were a suspect."

"Well, I didn't do it! Kristy and Jed did, but I went home! And I don't care if you believe me or not, you bitch!"

Allison gasped. Amy stormed through the living room, a lanky mass of fury in deliberately torn clothes, pins through her lip and eyebrow, purple lipstick smeared. She raced upstairs and slammed her bedroom door.

"Paul . . . oh, Paul . . . did you *hear* what she called me? Her *mother?*" Allison collapsed against him again, her slim body shaking so hard that Campbell's arms tightened to steady her.

But he felt shaky, too. This couldn't go on. The sullen rudeness, the fights, the breaking the law . . . their lives were being reduced to rubble by a fourteen-year-old.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Paul . . ." Allison sobbed, "do you remember how she *used* to be? Oh, God, the day she was born . . . remember? I was so happy I thought I'd die. And then how she was as a little girl, climbing on our laps for a cuddle . . . oh, Paul, I want my little girl back!"

"I know. I know, dearest."

"Don't *you?*"

He did. He wanted back the Amy who was so sweet, so biddable. Who thought he was the best daddy in the world. The feel of that light little body in his arms, the sweet baby smell at the back of her neck. . . .

He said slowly, "She's fourteen now. Legal age."

Immediately, Allison stopped sobbing. She stood still against him. Finally she said, "It isn't as if she'd be without resources. The Hitchens might take her in. Or somebody. And anyway, there are lots more like her out there." Allison's lower lip stuck out. "Might even do her good to learn how good she had it here with us!"

Campbell closed his eyes. "But we wouldn't know."

"You're damn right we wouldn't know! She doesn't want any part of *us,* then I don't want any part of *her!*" Again, Allison leaned against him. "But it isn't that, Paul. You know it isn't. I just want my little girl back again! I want to cuddle my lost little girl! Oh, I'd give anything to cuddle Amy again! Don't you want that, too?"

Campbell did. And the present situation really wasn't fair to Allison, who'd never been strong. Allison's health was being affected. She shouldn't have to be broken by this spiteful stranger who'd developed in their midst in the last year. Allison had rights, too.

His wife continued to sob against his chest, but softly now. Campbell felt strong, in control. He could make it all right for his wife, for himself. For everybody.

He said, "There are three embryos left."

Three of six. Three frozen vials in the fertility clinic, all from the same in-vitro fertilization, stored as standard procedure against a failure to carry to term. Or other need. Three more versions of the same embryo, the product of forced division before the first implantation. Standard procedure, yes, all over the country.

"I'll throw her out tonight," he told Allison, "and call the clinic in the morning." ○

ARE YOU MOVING ?

If you want your subscription to ASIMOV'S to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the zip codes for both, please!) to our subscription department:

ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
P.O. Box 54033, Boulder, CO 80322-4033
or fill out the change-of-address form on our website:
www.asimovs.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE LADYKILLER, AS OBSERVED FROM A SAFE DISTANCE

Brian Stableford

Brian Stableford has just had both his forty-ninth novel, *The Fountains of Youth* (Tor) and his fiftieth, *Year Zero* (Sarob Press), published. His fifty-first, *The Cassandra Complex*, which is chronologically the first book in his future history series from Tor, should be out in May 2001.

Stephanie was at her desk, catching up with what was still conventionally called "paperwork," when PC Courtland called from the front desk to say that a young man had walked in off the street wanting to talk to a detective about a murder.

"Whose murder?" Stephanie wanted to know.

Normally, she would have been delighted to be called away from her terminal to talk about a serious crime, but it was four o'clock in the morning, and her natural impetus was at its low ebb. If she hadn't cleared her backlog by the time the shift ended at six, she would have to work on, looking like hell, while the valuable unmonitored space around her became crowded with the fresh faces of people who had actually managed to get some sleep. It seemed sensible to hesitate.

"Young woman named Lynne Wardle," Courtland reported. "DOA at the General two hours ago—cause of death yet to be ascertained, according to the notification. No signs of violence or other suspicious circumstances, according to the officer at the scene."

"Isn't DS Hammond on duty?" Stephanie procrastinated. She knew that if the man at the desk turned out to be anything but a compulsive confesser this might be a good opportunity to exercise her new-won authority to some effect, but she had to put on a show of being disinterested in case she was later held to account for her failure to complete her paperwork. In fact, she was definitely interested. Her curiosity was beginning to flow again; the only thing more calculated to excite it than a plain and simple murder was a murder mystery.

"He says he wants to see a senior officer," the PC told her. "He only agreed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to settle for a DI when I told him that the DCI was away and couldn't be called in."

In Stephanie's experience, people who insisted on seeing senior officers were usually time-wasters, but she told herself that all allegations of murder had to be taken seriously in these days of rapidly falling crime-rates.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Randolph Markham-James," the PC replied, lowering his tone slightly as he added: "No arrests, fines, or convictions, but you definitely want to take a long look at what the ND has to say before you decide whether or not to talk to him."

Stephanie closed her own files and went into the National Database to see what its open section would tell anyone who cared to look about Randolph Markham-James. She could have obtained far more by accessing further stores to which the police had privileged access, but there was enough in the open record to let her see what PC Courtland meant.

Stephanie almost began to regret that the DCI was away, but she strangled the regret in its cradle. It was certainly arguable that the very last thing a recently promoted DI ought to be doing at four o'clock in the morning was exercising her authority upon the uniquely precious scion of one of Britain's few super-rich families; but Mr. Markham-James would probably take it amiss if she declined to hear what he had to say. In any case, the flow of her curiosity had now become a tide. Had fate not cursed her with an insatiable appetite for arcane knowledge, she would never have become a detective in the first place.

"Stick him in an interview room," she said, feigning a weariness that she no longer felt. "I'll be right down. Get on to the General and tell them we need everything they've got on Lynne Wardle, as and when it becomes available."

"Do you want me to call Markham-James senior and tell him that his clone's here?" Courtland asked, in a conspiratorial whisper. That was, of course, the big question—and there was no one to whom the buck could conveniently be passed.

"Not yet," Stephanie said, after taking a deep breath. "Let's hear what he has to say first. It's not as if we've arrested him, is it?"

The visitor looked exactly as Stephanie had expected him to look. His hair was blond and his eyes were blue. He wouldn't have been out of place at an audition to play the part of Dorian Gray. He seemed to be about twenty, but the flawlessness of his face made the seeming irrelevant. Given that the genetic engineers who had purged his skin of its vulnerability to mutatory flaws had been the best that money could buy, there was no way to gauge his age by mere appearance. The open record had already informed her that he was twenty-two.

The fact that Randolph Markham-James did not look much like his sixty-five-year-old parent did not astonish Stephanie unduly, although it did make her wonder exactly what the point of producing a clone-son was, if he were then to be engineered in embryo in such a way as to obliterate the likeness.

The young man stood up politely as she entered the room.

"I'm Detective Inspector Greaves, Mr. Markham-James," she said. "Please sit down."

Stephanie had automatically adopted the even and scrupulously polite

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tone that was compulsory for all public servants in all monitored environments—which meant almost everywhere nowadays—but she knew that this particular interview would require all the extra vigilance she could muster. As she took the seat opposite the young man's, she said: "I understand that you have some information about a death that took place early this morning."

Markham-James sat down again, but he was obviously uneasy. "This may seem absurdly twentieth century," he said, "but it might be better if I were to speak to a male officer." Not being a public servant, he didn't have to be careful about what he said, even in rooms where the walls had more than the usual quota of eyes and ears.

"You asked to see the senior detective on duty, Mr. Markham-James," Stephanie pointed out. "Would you prefer to talk to a female inspector or a male sergeant?"

The young man weighed up the two options carefully before saying: "I'm sorry. Yes, it's best that I talk to an inspector. The matter's delicate in more ways than one."

"Very well," Stephanie said, as gracefully as she could. "What is it that you want to tell me about Lynne Wardle's death?"

"I killed her," he said.

"Before you say any more, Mr. Markham-James, I must remind you that everything you say in this room is being recorded. If you intend to incriminate yourself, or even to risk self-incrimination, I strongly advise you to take legal advice before doing so. I hardly need to point out that a confession of murder is a very serious matter."

"I'm not the murderer," was all he said in reply. "I'm just the weapon. Not that you'll ever get him for murder, of course. Manslaughter is probably the best you can hope for. I'm no expert on the law."

Stephanie paused for a few moments before saying: "Who are you accusing, Mr. Markham-James? And of *what,* exactly, are you accusing him?" In an interview like this, even grammatical lapses might be reckoned unfortunate. Now that she had come so far, there was no way back, but she had to do everything possible to make sure that she was safe from possible fallout.

"I'm accusing my so-called father, Sir Ronald Markham-James," the young man retorted—not altogether unexpectedly, in view of what Stephanie had read in the open record of Randolph Markham-James's *vita.* "I'm accusing him of making me what I am, and, by so doing, causing the death of Lynne Wardle." He was mimicking her over-scrupulous manner of expression, although he didn't need to. He could say exactly what he wanted, any way he cared to phrase it.

Stephanie made herself pause again. It was the same hesitation, dragging on and on. In theory, there was only one law for the rich and poor alike, but that was in *theory*. She had the option of hearing what the young man had to say, so long as it was freely offered. She also had the option of calling a halt to the interview while she instructed Courtland to phone Sir Ronald Markham-James and inform him that his unnatural son had just made a serious allegation against him—and to suggest, in consequence, that he dispatch a squad of solicitors to take control of a situation that might get out of hand. The former option was the riskier as well as the more tempting alternative, but she figured, on due reflection, that she was brave enough to take it—and the curiosity visited upon her by her genes or early upbringing was urging her very powerfully to ignore the slight probability that she wasn't.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

While she was putting on a show of deep thought for the cameras, Stephanie reached out to the keyboard of the interview-room's terminal and summoned to the screen the information that PC Courtland had solicited from the General Hospital.

There had been no time, as yet, to carry out a full post-mortem, but superficial inspection suggested that Lynne Wardle had died of anaphylactic shock, caused by an extreme allergic reaction. There was no external indication of the manner in which she had made contact with the allergen.

"Well?" said Randolph Markham-James. "Don't you want to know the full story?"

The bottom line, Stephanie decided, was that she *did*. Whatever the ultimate outcome might be, she wanted to hear the full story.

"I'll be happy to listen to anything you care to tell me, Mr. Markham-James," she assured him, "Although I must repeat my advice that you consult a solicitor before saying anything that might incriminate yourself." She could have added "or, for that matter, anyone else" but that would have been overdoing it, so she didn't.

"Good," he said, with a slight sigh.

Stephanie knew that he wouldn't really be talking to *her* at all. He would be talking to the cameras and the microphones; she was only there to act as a facilitator, for him as much as for the law. Even so, hers was the hot seat, and the only place for a real detective to be.

"You know what I am, of course?" said Randolph Markham-James.

"I know that you're a clone, if that's what you mean," Stephanie admitted. "Given your age, you must have been one of the first dozen human clones produced in Britain in the wake of the House of Lords ruling."

One of the last acts of what the tabloid tapes called the Lords Rump, before the long-delayed final handover to the New Upper House, had been to rubber-stamp the Commons bill relating to the production of human clones. Any delay would probably have been a death-sentence, given the imminence and already-certain result of the 2027 General Election. Lord Westmoreland's speech on behalf of the already-beleaguered government of the day was still regarded as one of the more heroic *sorties* of the GM war. "The UN and European Charters of Human Rights forbid us to interfere with the right which every human being has to found a family," he had said. "How, then, can we possibly sustain a ban which refuses that right to people who have no other means of producing offspring but recourse to cloning technology? And if it is right for people who have no other means of founding a family to clone themselves, how can it be moral to deny other people the choice of so doing?" Stephanie knew that Ronald Markham-James was unlikely to have needed the final and most controversial phase of the noble lord's argument. It was probable that he, like so many men of his generation, had been rendered infertile by the pesticide plague, possessed of insufficient healthy spermatogonia to have any effective recourse even to the more ingenious varieties of IVF.

"But you also know, of course," the younger Markham-James added, "that I'm not exactly Daddy's identical twin."

"I understand that the stem cells taken from your father's bone-marrow were subjected to a certain amount of genetic *repair*," Stephanie conceded, carefully.

"And the rest," he said, bitterly. "It all depends, of course, what counts as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

repair—but the genetic engineers who had been tinkering with the embryos of sheep and cows for more than a generation were avid to try all their neatest tricks on human subjects. Applied homeotics at its most sophisticated, including a few judicious touches of stimulated allometry and a dash of enzymatic enhancement. Daddy didn't want his substitute self to be carrying *any* of his handicaps. He always took care to pose as an idealist—and I was just one more ideal."

"I'm sure that your father had the best of motives for asking the genetic engineers to make the modifications," Stephanie said, judiciously. Who was a mere public servant to say, or even to think, that narcissism might not be the best of all possible motives?

"He even called me Randolph, because he thought it sounded so much classier than Ronald," said the younger Markham-James. "All his life, he'd wanted to be a Randy instead of a mere Ron, in more ways than one. You know how he made his money, of course—or didn't your swift peek into the open files carry you that far?"

"Twenty years ago, Ronald Markham-James was the administrator of one of the largest of the Amalgamated Pension Funds," Stephanie said, slightly hurt that he'd assumed she would have had to look it up. She'd only been in her teens back then, but she'd watched the TV news all the way through and she'd even clicked on to the economic add-ons during the big brouhaha. "As I remember it, his investment strategy was very successful—for which vast numbers of the nation's pensioners were duly grateful."

"*You* might have to put it like that," he said, perhaps intending to compliment her intelligence by giving her credit for meaning far more than she could safely say in a monitored environment, "but I don't. He threw in his lot with the Hardinist Cabal. Having learned at his own father's knee the lessons that the corporate raiders of the 1980s taught the old pension-fund managers, he set out to become one of the spurs, urging a whole new generation of pirates to perfect the art of hostile takeovers and radical downsizing. He got right behind the men who cornered the future—and the rapidly expanding ranks of Britain's new centenarians were behind him all the way, cheering every penny that he added to their annuities. It's ironic, don't you think, that the tab-tapes took to calling him one of the New Pharaohs of Capitalism?"

"Wasn't it one of the Pharaohs of the New Capitalism?" Stephanie asked, innocently. The reason that Randolph Markham-James thought it was ironic, whichever way round it might have been, was that common wisdom maintained that the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt had been in the habit of marrying their sisters to save their royal blood from dilution. Ronald Markham-James hadn't actually married his sister, but when he had been required to find a surrogate mother to bear his clone-child, his medical advisors had urged him to recruit his sister, on the grounds that their 50-percent genetic compatibility would work to the advantage of the child—or would, at least, avoid the slight hazards associated with genetically incompatible surrogacy. Ronald Markham-James's sister—who was Randolph's aunt as well as his birth-mother—had been only too happy to oblige, in order to obtain Ronald's lavish financial assistance in the shaping of her own clone-child, who had every possible right to be reckoned Randolph's sister.

"Well, he wasn't quite a Pharaoh, either way," the young man said. "He might have backed the Cabal, but they wouldn't actually let him in on the conspiracy. Not quite *one of them,* you see. You can have no idea how badly that rankled. The world is full of men who'd be perfectly content to have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been used and exploited if they'd come out of it with billions of euros in their own pockets as well as trillions in the coffers of the APF they were managing, but Ron was never one of them. The chip on his shoulder could have filled in the Thames Estuary, if not the bloody Channel. Don't look at me like that—I'm trying to fill you in on the background here, so that you'll understand the motive for the crime. That *is* relevant, I suppose?"

Stephanie wasn't aware of the fact that her expression was anything but perfectly bland, but she tried hard to simulate the patient sympathy of a saint for the benefit of the invisible cameras. "You haven't yet given me any reason to believe that a crime has been committed," she pointed out.

"I suppose I haven't—yet," he admitted, with a sigh. "After all, everything he did in the wake of the Rump ruling was perfectly legal. He'd always had inoperable myopia, so he had my genes tickled to ensure that I'd have perfect vision. He'd always been a *little* man, so he had my growth hormones tuned up to such efficiency that I'm six feet tall—oh, and the extra inch for good measure. I won't bore you with the amendments to my digestive system—after all, I'm sure that you're as keen as I am to get to the dirty bits. You know what stimulated allometry involves, of course?"

"As I understand it," Stephanie said, carefully, "allometric growth determines the proportions of the developing body before and after birth. One of the key discoveries of applied homeotics is the ability to affect the proportions of an organism—that's why modern chickens have such tiny wings."

"Pretty much," the young man said, although Stephanie knew that he was being generous because she had the layman's habit of cloaking ignorance with vagueness. "And it's why my prick is more than twice the size of my so-called father's. Talk about compensating for one's inadequacies . . . he'd always wanted to be a ladies' man, you see. Not for breeding purposes, of course—he knew that he was irredeemably infertile by the time that he was in his mid-teens—but because he thought that all his friends, not to mention all his enemies, were getting a lot more sex than he was. If we hadn't consigned psychoanalysis to the dustbin of intellectual history, I'd be forced to wonder whether his insatiable greed for money was ever anything more than the displacement of a sexual avidity that he could never express for lack of willing partners. He always wanted to be a ladykiller, but he never had the looks, the charm, or the stature. Even the money didn't help, because he always knew that the women it bought were whores, no matter how hard they pretended. Well, he's a ladykiller now, and no mistake. It wasn't just size, you see. He thought that size mattered more than anything, but he wasn't about to neglect any other enhancements that were going. Are you following me?"

"Perhaps it would be better if you simply tell me what you mean, Mr. Markham-James, instead of beating around the bush," Stephanie suggested. She was trying hard to hide her slightly painful awareness of his embarrassment, and not just for the cameras' sake.

"My sperms are in tip-top condition, of course," the young man went on, his own voice becoming tautly level for the first time. "But there's more to semen than sperms. It's a cocktail with all kinds of active ingredients, easily enhanced. The tab-tape revelations have all been disputed, of course, but they're true enough in the main. It *is* possible to engineer the genes that collaborate in the production of semen to produce an addictive effect more powerful than that of heroin. Have you ever been in love, Inspector Greaves?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do you mean the lowered-serotonin thirty-month madness kind of love?" Stephanie parried, expertly.

"Oh, any one of us can do *that,*" Randolph Markham-James told her. "In spite of all the remedies girls can buy at Boot's, even the products of somatic engineering can still hook them good and hard. The defense industry has been two steps behind for the last thirty years. Actually, I was thinking of something deeper, something far more meaningful. *True* love."

"I think true implies *faithful* rather than *real* in that particular phrase," Stephanie said, working on the theory that pedantry was probably the safest course to ply in a conversational minefield.

"Really? Well, I'm implying both. Daddy didn't cut any corners when he got his tame Frankensteins to cook up *my* testicular cocktail. He wanted it all. Not just a thirty-month madness—the whole shebang. Anyone who goes all the way with me more than a couple of times, Inspector Greaves, goes *all the way*. When the hook gets into their soul, they're well and truly hooked, and the odds are that it'll last forever. Even once is a risk, twice is touch and go, and three times is invariably fatal. All those tabloid tales about modern Don Juans don't tell the half of it—or maybe those other guys' daddies simply didn't have inferiority complexes the size of Ron's. I don't believe I'm the only grown-up with the full armory, but I suppose I might be. Either way, though, there must be a couple of hundred more coming up to puberty as I speak. That must be a sobering thought, for a woman."

Stephanie figured that he was probably exaggerating—he was a man, after all. What girls could buy over the counter at Boot's wasn't really an issue, except for the poor ones who couldn't afford to obtain more effective armor from a good somatic engineer. Maybe there was a slight lag phase even in the somatically sophisticated "defense industry," but the logic of the situation suggested that all assertive innovations in seduction technology would be followed in due time by the means to nullify their effects. Nor was there any reason for Randolph Markham-James to suggest that members of the female sex had particular cause for anxiety. So far as Stephanie could tell, unwary males needed just as much protection from *femmes fatales* like Randolph's little sister as unwary females needed from him.

It seemed to be a good time to cut to the chase. "Lynne Wardle seems to have died because she suffered a massive allergic reaction," Stephanie said, having checked the screen to make sure that no new information had come in that could contradict the early indications.

"That's right," the young man said, sourly. "And it's me she was allergic to—my semen, to be specific. The semen whose original design was commissioned by my father, Sir Ronald Markham-James, the pensioners' friend—and whose subsequent construction was carried out by the same engineers. I was the loaded gun that carried out the assassination, but he loaded me and reloaded me. He was the assassin."

"You've given me no reason to think that anyone is culpable, Mr. Markham-James," Stephanie pointed out. "An allergic reaction surely qualifies as an accident—unless you knew that making love to Miss Wardle would have that effect." *In which case,* she didn't add, *you can't reasonably shift the blame to your father.*

"It's not as simple as that," the younger Markham-James told her, unsurprisingly. Stephanie knew that it never was "as simple as that" when one was dealing, even as a policeman, with a man or woman in love.

"How complicated can it be?" she asked, knowing full well that there was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nothing on Earth that could stop him explaining, now that he had found a shoulder and had been granted permission to cry on it.

"I used to give my father the benefit of the doubt," the young man said, curling his lip contemptuously as he used his tone to indicate that he must have been a fool to do so. "I used to think that he didn't understand what he'd done to me—that he hadn't quite thought it through. After all, he knew how humiliating it was to know that any woman who looked twice at him was only interested in his money. They all look twice at me, of course, but there are so many like me even now that looks are beginning to be taken for granted. My hook is a little further along the line than Ron's money, but it's no better—in fact, it's worse. Greed is an honest emotion by comparison with the grip that psychotropic semen takes."

"They still sell condoms at the chemist's," Stephanie pointed out.

"They still build walls around prisons," Markham-James countered, "even though it takes far more ingenuity nowadays to foil escape attempts. Preventing pregnancy is one thing; preventing all contact with bodily fluids like mine is another. Believe me, Inspector Greaves, anything short of virtual sex over a satellite link qualifies as unsafe where I'm concerned. When I don't really care, of course, even that can be enough, and even when I only care a little bit, I can steel myself to issue the rejection slip in good time—but that's not the problem."

Stephanie realized, belatedly, that when Markham-James had asked her if she'd ever been in love, he wasn't trying to raise her sympathy for anyone likely to become addicted to him. He'd been trying to raise her sympathy for himself.

"It's when I want to be truly intimate that the problem really kicks in," he went on, without waiting for a prompt. "When I want to be with someone for more than just a little while—really *be* with them—I always know that I can make them want to be with *me*. But I don't want to *make* them want it! I want them to want it for themselves, honestly and spontaneously. When I love someone, I want them to love me for what I *am*—a person, not a battery of biochemical dirty tricks! I don't want to enslave the people I love. I want them to be free."

This time, he waited for a prompt. Stephanie obliged. "Did you love Lynne Wardle?"

"That probably seems unlikely," Markham-James observed, presuming that Stephanie had consulted the open record on the subject of the victim of the alleged crime. "After all, she wasn't *enhanced* like my lovely little sister and all her winsome kind. She had poor parents, and she was natural-born, with all her flaws intact. Well, that's what I *liked* about her. I could never love anyone who wasn't. She was *real,* and she made me want to be real too."

The man is a walking cliché, Stephanie marveled, without letting the least indication of her cynical wonder show on her face. *This is the pure essence of modern romantic fiction. How could someone like him possibly have fallen for that kind of mush?*

"You probably think that this is the stuff of soap opera," Markham-James said, although all the applied homeotics in the world couldn't have gifted him with telepathy, "but the stuff of soap opera wouldn't be the stuff of soap opera if it didn't reflect the way people actually think and feel. Maybe thinking and feeling that way makes me far more ordinary than Ron would ever have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought possible, but if it does, I'm not ashamed of it. I'm still human, after all. I have human ambitions, human needs, human standards. Tinkering with my semen didn't make me into some kind of alien, instinctively contemptuous of everything merely human. Maybe Ron thought it would, and maybe that's what he wanted for himself, but if he did, he was wrong in more ways than one. I loved Lynne. I *fell* in love with her, the way you're supposed to, and I wanted her to fall in love with me, without any kind of push or pull. And I wanted us to be *lovers,* with all that the word implies. *True* lovers."

"There's no crime in that, Mr. Markham-James," Stephanie pointed out, meaning: *I get the picture—now get to the point.*

"That's not what my father thought," the young man observed. "He had very strong opinions on the suitability of Miss Wardle as a future daughter-in-law. You'd almost have thought that he'd be required to marry the girl himself."

"What did you do, Mr. Markham-James?" Stephanie asked, very softly. She'd already guessed, of course. It wasn't hard, given that there were only two alternatives, and he was the one with the problem as well as the one with the money—but she needed him to spell it out in order to supply her curiosity with the piquant taste-sensations it required.

"I tried to undo what my father had done to me," he told her. "I went to the men who had made me what I am, and I asked them to unmake me. I asked them to take the juice out of my seminal cocktail."

The safer approach, of course, would have been to equip the girl with proper defenses—but Randolph Markham-James was the chivalrous type. He'd never have sent someone else to the somatic engineers' lab while *he* could go himself. Stephanie didn't feel able to ask whether he had also asked the engineers to reverse the results of the selective allometric stimulation; there was no way she could have done so without sounding sarcastic, and she knew perfectly well what the answer was.

"They told me at first that they couldn't do it," he went on, "but I wasn't about to take no for an answer. I know all about the crucial difference between embryonic engineering and somatic engineering, and the extreme difficulty of using the methods of the latter kind to duplicate or reverse the effects of the former, but I also know that necessity is the mother of improvisation. I told them that they didn't have to undo *all* their Ron-inspired mischief. They just had to make me normal enough to let Lynne remain free of unnatural biochemical authority. Eventually, they agreed that although they couldn't stop me producing the addictive cocktail without doing undue collateral damage, they could do a further augmentation that would neutralize certain selected effects. They told me that the operation was untried, and couldn't be tested on animals because the mediating function of consciousness was vital to its function, but they said that the computer simulations looked promising. If they'd been as scrupulous as you, Inspector Greaves, all might have been well—but they weren't. Unlike you, they reached for the phone before they even let me into the office."

"They told you that there was a risk," Stephanie said, because it was the most neutral remark she could come up with in the circumstances.

"They didn't tell me that Ron was on the case, and that he wanted them to make damn sure that the risk turned into a certainty."

"Is that anything more than pure conjecture?" she had to ask.

"If you mean *did they leave a trail of recoverable evidence?* I don't know—but I certainly hope so," Randolph Markham-James answered, much as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stephanie had expected, "If you only mean *do I know for sure that it's true,* the answer's a simple *yes.* It wasn't an accident, Inspector. Even you couldn't get a look at Lynne Wardle's geneprint and developmental record without a warrant, but that's because you're not so far above the law that you can buy your way into any database that exists. If I were giving Ron the benefit of the doubt, I'd have to admit that he might not actually have intended to kill her—in fact, it probably would have tickled his perverse fancy even more if I'd just kept on and on making her sick, until she couldn't stand the sight of me—but I really don't think he cared how far over the top his lackeys went. *Get rid of her,* he must have said. *Make sure you get rid of her, but see to it that all the rest remain vulnerable, and that no harm comes to him.* And that's what they did—the first part, anyhow. They made sure—so sure, in fact, that Lynne went into anaphylactic shock. She was dead within minutes, long before the paramedics could reach her."

The young man didn't bother to add the judgment that getting the first part right had probably made the second part impossible. Stephanie could see the strength of his conviction that real harm had been done to him, and that it was irreparable. Sir Ronald Markham-James, on the other hand, had presumably taken it for granted that he would get over it eventually. Stephanie figured that Sir Ronald was probably right. People lived for a long time nowadays. That was why pension-fund managers had been forced to become so utterly ruthless in playing the world's stock markets. In the long twilight of modern life, what mattered most to the economically advantaged was annuities. As Stephanie's own great-grandmother was still wont to say, far too frequently, love didn't butter any parsnips.

"Do you have any proof that your doctors did anything to you other than what you required of them?" Stephanie had to ask.

"Isn't that what a police investigation is supposed to discover?" he countered, with what would have been awesome naïveté if he'd meant it. "Aren't you obliged to launch such an investigation, now that I've made the complaint? I've given you motive and opportunity. What more do you need?"

"I need hard evidence," Stephanie pointed out, dutifully.

"I saw her die. I'm a witness." He must have known how worthless that was, but he wasn't about to let the cameras see that he knew it.

"They told you there was a risk," Stephanie reminded him.

"They were—and are—murdering hypocrites," he insisted, "but they were mere instruments, like me. They were the gunsmiths and *I* was the gun: the assassination weapon. *His* weapon. That's all I've ever been, and all I ever will be, while he's alive and rich. I'm his way of getting back at the world for all the imagined indignities he was condemned by fate and lousy genes to bear throughout his youth. I'm his gesture of defiance, and he couldn't allow me to throw myself away. He couldn't bear to think that I might want ordinary things, or that I might be able to love an ordinary person. He wasn't prepared to tolerate that."

If psychoanalysis hadn't been consigned to the dustbin of intellectual history, Stephanie thought, borrowing her visitor's sarcastic phrase, *I might be tempted to wonder whether there's a certain amount of projection going on here. I might even be tempted to hypothesize that the one and only reason Randolph Markham-James had for fixating on an unenhanced girl from a poor family was that he knew exactly how far up his father's nose it would get. Fortunately, there isn't the slightest temptation urging me to think anything so ridiculous.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The results of the autopsy have just been posted," she informed the young man, having just caught the flash on the screen from the corner of her eye. "The coroner will have to make the final judgment, of course, but the preliminary findings indicate no suspicious circumstances. A freakish accident, it seems—I'm translating the usual jargon into layman's language, of course. Lynne Wardle's death was an unfortunate side-effect of the fashionability of untested devices in somatic engineering, offering no substantial grounds for a prosecution for criminal negligence, let alone anything more serious. You're in the clear, Mr. Markham-James."

"I don't *want* to be *in the clear,*" he retorted.

"Apparently not," Stephanie conceded. "Nevertheless, there are no grounds in the *post-mortem* results for bringing a case against you or anyone else."

"I've just given you grounds," he said, stubbornly.

"I'm afraid that I can't agree," Stephanie told him, coming down off the fence at last. "I can see no evidence of anything but a tragic accident. I understand that you feel badly about it, but I can't take any action on the basis of what you've told me."

"Has it ever occurred to you, Inspector Greaves," the young man said, sneeringly, "that the principal reason why there seem to be so few murders these days might be that the vast majority go unidentified and uninvestigated?"

It would have been extremely unwise to say *of course it has,* so she said "I can understand why you're overwrought, Mr. Markham-James," instead. Then she added: "Perhaps you should go home now, and try to get some sleep. If you still think that there are any suspicious circumstances regarding Miss Wardle's death when you've had time to think it through, you're at liberty to ask the coroner to hold a formal inquest and to volunteer to give evidence there. I'll make a report to my superiors, of course, and if they or the coroner decide that an investigation is desirable, we shall do our utmost to discover the truth of the matter."

"Or, to put it another way," he said, "you don't want to get involved unless and until you absolutely *have* to."

"I'm a police officer, Mr. Markham-James," she reminded him. "I have to follow the procedures laid down by the law. I can't take any action without proper grounds."

He must have known all along that this was where it would end. Talking had helped him to vent his spleen and calm himself down, but he'd known—even if he hadn't admitted it to himself—that nothing else was achievable. He didn't protest unduly when Stephanie showed him out, and she didn't complain about her time being wasted. It had been a good story, well worth hearing. It had even supplied some food for thought that might turn out to be more than mere confectionery.

As soon as Stephanie was back in unmonitored space, she phoned Sir Ronald Markham-James. It was still only five-thirty, but he wasn't asleep. He was keeping track of events as they unfolded, and he'd almost certainly been reading the results of the *post-mortem* at the very same time as she had been scanning them herself. He presumably thought that he had a far better understanding of the situation than she did, and he might have been right. Who could possibly know what young Randolph was capable of thinking and doing better than his doting father?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir," Stephanie said, after identifying herself, "but there's a possibility that you might be in danger and I'm obliged to notify you of that fact."

"Thank you, Inspector," said the not-quite-Pharaoh of the not-really New Capitalism. "I appreciate your taking the trouble. I'll make sure that my staff keep the guns locked up and the kitchen devils safe in their drawers. I can't believe that my son is capable of harming me, but I've always been a careful man, and I'm certainly not tired of life yet."

"In my experience, sir," Stephanie said, although she knew that it was a trifle reckless, "people are actually *more* likely to try to harm their clone-parents than the common-or-garden kind." *If psychoanalysis hadn't been consigned to the dustbin of intellectual history,* she thought, *we might be tempted to think that we could understand and sympathize with a desire to murder one's other selves. After all, it's always those other selves that are the darker ones, the ones in need of exorcism.*

"Do you have any children of your own, Inspector?" was the great man's unexpected counter.

"No sir," she said.

"In that case," he informed her, loftily, "I'm afraid that your experience isn't very relevant. It can hardly be extensive, in any case. There are so few crimes of violence nowadays—and even fewer children of my son's quality."

"That's true, sir," Stephanie said, dutifully. "Monitored people are careful people, as the saying has it, so it's not entirely surprising that the incidents of violence that continue to occur—especially those which result in death—are mostly crimes of unusual passion." She congratulated herself silently on the felicity of that final phrase, but she could only wonder whether he would catch the full spectrum of its implications and hope that it hit a sensitive spot.

"Unusual passions are the currency of progress," Sir Ronald informed her, frostily.

"And unfortunate accidents are its cost," Stephanie observed, trying to sound agreeable. Her body might be in unmonitored space, but there was no such thing as a private telephone conversation.

"Genetic engineers do so much good that they can be forgiven the occasional unforeseeable accident," Sir Ronald was quick to say.

Stephanie agreed with him—but it was the *foreseeable* "accidents" that she didn't like. "Good night, sir," she said. "I'm very sorry to have troubled you at such an unsociable hour."

"That's perfectly all right," he assured her. "I expect my son will be home soon. I think I'll wait up for him."

That turned out to be the first unwise thing he had said to her, because it transpired that his stupid, guilt-stricken, and overwrought son never *did* get home, in spite of all that Stephanie had done for him by way of lending him a shoulder to cry on.

The verdict returned at the inquest was accidental death, but in view of all the safety features with which Randolph Markham-James's car had been fitted, Stephanie couldn't help thinking, when she heard the news, that even misadventure might have been on the generous side. Even in the privacy of her own thoughts, however, she scrupulously avoided voicing the thought that if psychoanalysis hadn't been consigned to the dustbin of intellectual history, one might have been tempted to wonder whether the young man's death might even qualify as a perverse form of murder. Sir

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ronald would doubtless live to an extremely ripe old age, worshipped by every annuity-cherishing pensioner in the land, but even on the basis of a very brief and business-like acquaintance, Stephanie might have felt entitled to suspect that he would never feel entirely *complete,* no matter what kinds of somatic reconstruction the march of progress might eventually make available to him. That wasn't a can of worms she wanted to open.

Stephanie did feel free to wonder, though, in the months that followed, whether it would have made any difference to Randolph Markham-James's fate if she had agreed to make some sort of investigation of his claims. The DCI would, of course, have squashed any investigation she might have been silly enough to initiate, and it would have been dangerous to utter a false promise in monitored space, but she remained uncomfortably aware of the fact that she *could* have hazarded slightly more than she had. If she had applied enough ingenuity, she *might* have given Randolph Markham-James reason enough to hope that he might one day be allowed to testify against his father—and perhaps, therefore, reason enough to look after himself a little better than he had. Then again, if she had refused to listen to him at all until his father had dispatched a team of lawyers to look after him, he might have remained safe in their custody long after he had left the station.

In the end, she decided that she had nothing for which to reproach herself. Randolph Markham-James had, after all, been a guilty man. For all his self-justifying talk about being merely the weapon, *he* had been the one who subjected Lynne Wardle to the risk that killed her. He could and should have stuck to his own kind, to partners who had proper defenses against his biochemical arsenal. He could and should have tailored his passions to fit his moral responsibilities, just as everybody else in the imperfect world had to do.

One day, Stephanie thought, when she happened to catch the briefest glimpse of Sir Ronald Markham-James on the TV news, on the day he married for the seventh time, she would have a child of her own—but she would do the job properly. She would allow her daughter to discover idiosyncratic inadequacies and unusual passions of her own, instead of merely inverting those with which heredity might otherwise have equipped her.

And in the meantime, she resolved to make absolutely certain that she never fell in love with anyone who had the means to subject her to a surreptitious push or pull. Everyone had to adapt to the kind of world they lived in. Everyone always had.

It was as simple as that. O

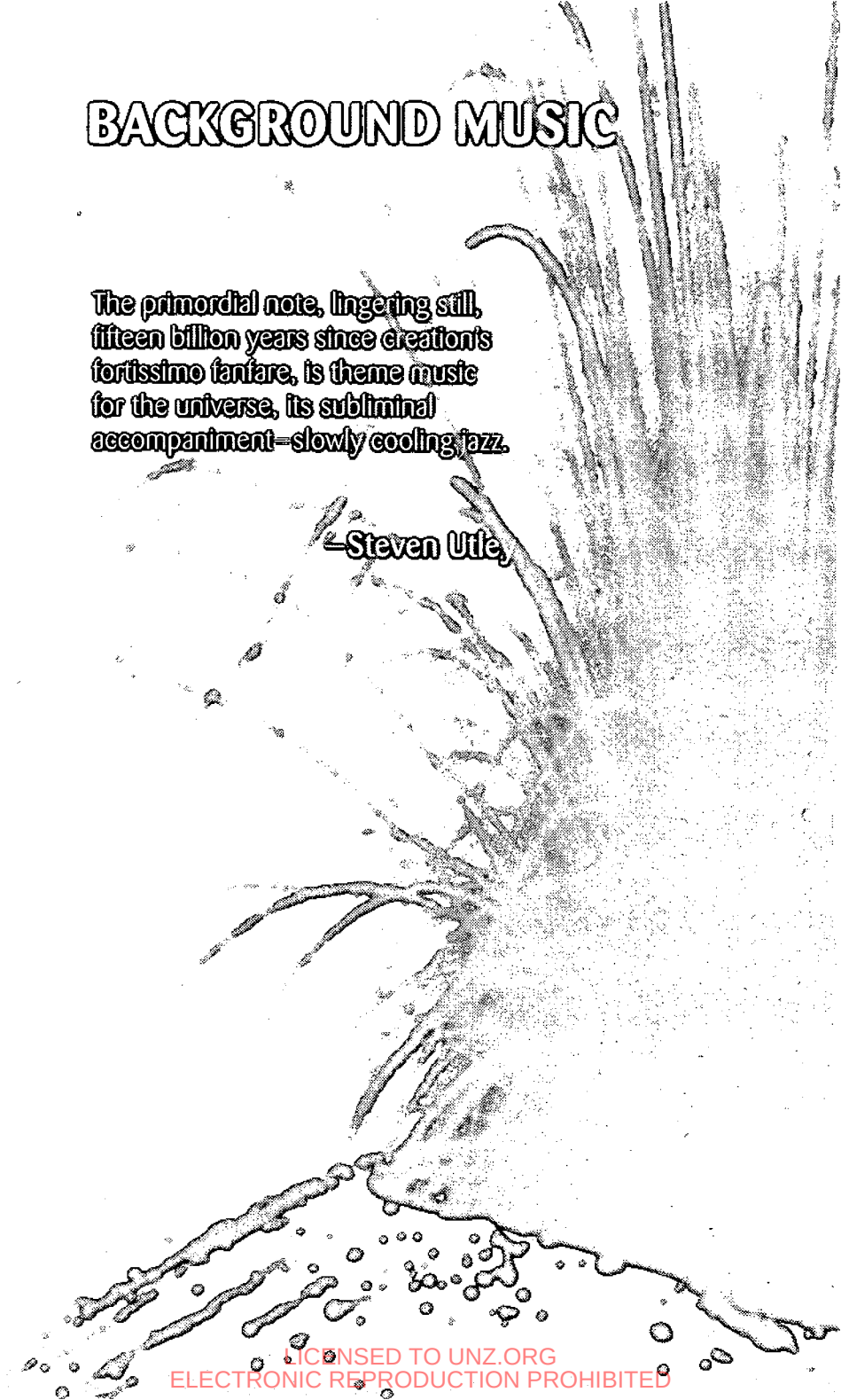
We welcome your letters, which should be sent to ***Asimov's,*** 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016, or e-mail to **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**. Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—please direct all subscription inquiries to: P. O. Box 54033, Boulder, Co 80322-4033.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BACKGROUND MUSIC

The primordial note, lingering still, fifteen billion years since creation's fortissimo fanfare, is theme music for the universe, its subliminal accompaniment—slowly cooling jazz.

—Steven Utley



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE WURST KING VS ALUMINUM FOIL BOY

R. Neube

Illustration by Mark Evans

One of our most entertaining authors returns to *Asimov's* with an outrageous look at interstellar adventure, commerce, and . . . chess.

LICENSED TO LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Mister ran across the lobby. Amidst a bank of elevators, one door was propped open with a thick orange safety bar. A curious alien leaned over the bar, gazing at the transparent secrets of the shaft. The reptilian Dyb' had an exceptionally long tail. The Mister snatched the tail and jerked it over the alien's head as he rammed into the broad Dyb' back—one smooth, athletic move.

The Mister should have gone into ballet.

The average Dyb' weighed 250 kilos. This one looked scrawny, 100 keys at best. The reptilian alien rocketed into the shaft without making a sound.

I scanned the lobby of the Hyatt. At one A.M., it was predictably sedate. A human clerk chatted on the phone in a corner from which he could not have seen the assault. A reporter napped on the sofa in a conversation nook. The THUMP! of the Dyb' colliding with the bottom of the shaft caught their attention. Everyone saw me pointing at a ventilation shaft in the ceiling after donning my village idiot mien. The clerk called maintenance about the noise. I shrugged, moseying to the elevator bank while The Mister repeatedly stabbed the up button.

"That was stupid," I whispered.

The Mister jerked around, his long narrow face flushed and scrunched into a macabre grimace. "Damned aliens are spying on me!"

"They *already* own the galaxy. They could care less about you. If someone had seen you . . ." I wouldn't get paid, I didn't add.

Pathetic. I was reduced to renting myself as a bodyguard/handler to a chess player with the cuddly personality of a serial killer. This in order to earn the price of a phone call home.

I had traveled light-years to this multi-species stellar system to bring my business to the Dyb'. Instead, I had been forced to spend myself broke. The Sol Trade Commission Embassy refused to forward an SOS to my company. I argued with a bureaucrat with the phone company until a security team arrived with their stun guns to convince me there was no such a thing as an interstellar collect call.

So I answered an ad to earn some quick cash. I'd figured that it should be easy to wrangle a chess nerd. Alas, the Chess Federation assigned me to the second best of humanity's chess players—Brendon Alexander Fuller. They offered me room, board, and six hundred Nok dollars a day. In five days, I would have enough cash to call home. My firm would wire me money: boom, end of crisis.

I had been on the job a mere five hours. Alex the Great had slapped a hotel clerk, spat on a reporter, exposed himself to a group of Dyb' soldiers who asked us where the nearest worship center was, stole the tip off a table at the restaurant, and murdered a Dyb' by throwing him down an elevator shaft.

As the elevator beeped and opened, I heard the baritone voice of the flying Dyb' cursing in three languages. So it wasn't murder . . . yet.

"What if someone had seen you?" I hissed as the doors closed.

"What if I'd been born a baked potato?" replied The Mister, calmly.

"Back home, they call me the Wurst King." I said. "Know why?"

"Like I care."

There are times when violence is the only sensible reply of a reasonable man. I stopped with my third punch. Feeling as if I ought to be awarded a medal for restraint.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Because I'm going to make you into *sausage* if you mess with me," I growled.

As The Mister crawled along the floor trying to breathe, I read him my personal riot act. I grabbed his collar, dragging him down the corridor once we reached the fifth level. "Hopeless alcoholic coming through. Can't hold his booze," I said to everyone we passed.

Once we got to our suite, I reread the riot act. I believe The Mister listened the second time. At least he shook his head as he crawled into his bedroom. Before his door slammed, I yelled, "And no more of this *The Mister* shit, Fuller!"

My kingdom started with little more than my family's bankrupt ranch and a cluster of empty barns. I decided to call my excess barns warehouses. As the people of my home colony went into space by the hundreds of thousands to replace the Dyb' who had moved to greener pastures, many stored their lares and penates in my warehouses. I started buying the stored goods, then opened a chain of used home-goods stores. This cash machine fueled my purchase of six ranches and twenty farms, amounting to thirty thousand hectares, virtually the entire Gineanne Valley. I opened a factory making sausages.

I knew there were fortunes to be made feeding the dominant species of the galaxy.

It took me a couple of years to save the three million bucks to travel to the Irlane polis of Hos'in, where the Dyb' Toolina Gathering maintained the closest branch of their trade commission. All I needed was four licenses to do business with the aliens. Just four.

Dyb' clerks issued the paperwork. I returned the next day with every form completed to perfection. The clerk handed me a bill to expedite my request. Hand over the cash and you had your license within minutes. Bribe or fee, it was never clearly explained. Nor was any alternative method of gaining those critical licenses discussed.

I'd brought a million cash for mad money. That got me two of the four licenses. Had to cash in my return trip ticket and sell my Rolex to pay the last two bribes. But Wurst King, Inc. could now legally export to every Dyb' world in the galaxy, all ten thousand plus of them. With one millionth of one percent market penetration, we could be exporting a billion sausages a year.

Provided I could get back home.

Of course, the Irlane had video monitors around the elevators. The insectile aliens were renowned as gadget-masters of the galaxy. Why wouldn't one of their orbital cities sport all the bells and whistles? One of their security teams knocked on the door of our suite ten minutes after the attempted murder.

These Irlane were short, two meters on average, and stocky, with muddy blue shells. Like a lobster who'd mated with a centaur. Their four arms and four legs were granite-sturdy.

I had warred with the species; I had traded with them. But the thing that *really* cheesed me off was how well the Irlane spoke English. Bloody smart-aleck aliens!

"Pardon me," said the Irlane who pushed his/her/its bulk through the door the instant I opened it.

"Hotel Security," said the second one, who bulldozed me into the center of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the sitting room. A dozen tentacles emerged from its chitinous arms to pat me down, to remove the Deng semi-auto from my pocket. The critter's fourth arm held a scanner, reading the passport crystal in my forearm.

"I have the required permit for that pistol. The Chess Federation hired me to protect—"

Alex the Great wandered from his bedroom, wearing leopard underwear. After a tremendous collegiate chug from a bottle of champagne, he belched. The aliens froze in astonishment.

CHESS, read the banner in the hotel lobby, HUMANITY'S AMBASSADOR TO THE GALAXY. I couldn't get that public relations shibboleth out of my thoughts.

Alexander pulled a pill from the waistband of his bikini briefs. God, I hoped it was a pill. And popped it into his mouth. Contouring into a chair with boneless ease, he giggled.

"They're here to steal my secrets," announced my ward, pointing at the security team.

"We are *here,*" said the first Irlane, "because a guest of our *Niiji* was pushed down an elevator shaft."

"He was a spy, who was disrupting my brain with telepathic assaults." Alex the Great swatted at invisible flies as he spoke.

I shrugged. "We'll plead insanity." My brain slapped me; I had to do better than this.

"I often play the Fuller Defense," said the second Irlane. The way the alien shuffled, I wondered if it was squirming up the courage to ask for an autograph.

"Was your guest harmed seriously by the . . . *accident?*" I asked.

The second alien stomped with one of its hoofy/feet things. Wasn't that how the species laughed?

The first alien clacked a forearm against its chest, silencing its partner. "The fact that Citizen Tsk'ha'na'cluck was too intoxicated to be harmed by a ten meter fall is not germane. Nor will his arrest for using the elevator shaft as a urinal before the incident have any effect on this case."

"This is no case," I lied. "Citizen Fuller was intoxicated, and he ran too quickly on waxed floors. He skidded out of control. It was a pity he collided with Citizen Tsk'whatsit. A pity, but an accident."

"That's the only way the damned creatures can beat me!" Alex the Great muttered. "The Dyb' play with my mind. But not *this* time. *This* dog howls on Hos'in Polis!"

"This is not acceptable behavior," said First.

"The Commissioner," I blurted, desperate to save my job for four more days. "Perhaps your superior should call the Chess Commissioner. Allow us to deploy Plan B. Citizen Fuller will only leave this suite to go to matches. The Chess Federation will pick up the tab for any extra security you wish to post outside the door of our suite."

"And I want *him,*" Fuller said, pointing at me, "arrested for assault!"

First eyed me with the hundred eyestalks atop its watermelon head. Tendrils below its mouths dangled limply. "It would be unfortunate if the tournament lost one of its luminaries to an *accident*. If you, as the solitary eyewitness, provide me with a sworn statement that this was an 'accident' . . ." The alien made a rattling sound in its shell. "I will accept your proposal, Citizen Mornet. You will keep Citizen Fuller—"

"Call me *The Mister!*" bellowed my ward.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"—from getting . . . *perturbed* once more."

"Call me The Mister!" shouted my ward again, before toppling over, his head striking the floor with a dull thud.

The aliens edged toward the door.

"I'm not paid enough for this shit," I grumbled.

The alien stared at the second best chess player of the human species. "I'm sorry," it said.

It sounded sincere.

Call me The Mister was the first power trip Alex the Great pulled on me. The Mister. Right. Then there was: walk four steps behind me. Then there was: kill anyone who asks for my autograph.

I should have punched him more.

No doubt the putative genius was on the phone with the Federation complaining about me, not realizing that, as we'd parted company, the Commissioner had whispered into my ear, "Nobody cares what happens to that prima donna. Just keep him from embarrassing humanity."

I had spent twenty minutes in the Commissioner's office when I came for the job interview. The interviewer had been impressed with my veteran status. He wanted to hear all my stories of derring-do.

I had none. You lived, you killed, and, if luck turned her back on you, you died. Meanwhile, you ate cold rations, fantasized about a hot bath, and wallowed in mud as the anti-personnel missiles and the other Irlane gadgets hunted you.

Fortunately, I'd fetched along my medals, in the vain hope that they would impress the Dyb' bureaucrats. They hadn't. However, my *human* interviewer fingered them as if they were pieces of the Holy Grail.

My home colony on Howard IV was part of the real estate the Dyb' had gone to war to protect from Irlane invaders a decade ago. My service in the militia lasted seventeen months and two weeks—five campaigns in four star systems, victories all. Nine thousand of us had volunteered; six hundred of us came home. As reward for our outstanding military service, the Dyb' presented the title for the entire Howard System to our colony, as well as freeing the colony itself.

It was cheaper than paying us.

The interviewer never asked about my current occupation.

Afterward, I was escorted into the Commissioner's office for a brief rah-rah speech, and sent to meet my ward.

Alex the Great's secret weapon appeared the morning of his first match. Ten rolls of aluminum foil arrived from the hotel kitchen. Fifty bucks a roll went onto our room service tab.

My ward strode from his bedroom, still wearing those absurd leopard briefs. With a flourish of duct tape, he proceeded to seal himself in foil. It was a smooth, obviously often-practiced exercise. In scant minutes, a totally foil-wrapped lunatic danced back into his bedroom.

I finally broke into the honor bar. This was too much. Before I could apply myself to a two hundred dollar liter of vodka, my ward sauntered from his bedroom. Over the aluminum foil, he wore a long, flowing Dracula cloak with a bulky hood.

"That's *wool,* you lunatic. You're going to fry."

My ward chortled, opening his cloak to expose a pair of battery belts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around his waist. A bright yellow breastplate with a personal air conditioner was attached to them. I could feel its icy exhale from two meters away.

"I suffered a heat stroke on New Amsterdam testing my telepath armor. But it worked!" Alex the Great wrapped himself in his thick cloak. "The batteries only last two hours. I can't let the clock catch me."

"Better not let the Sanity Committee catch you," I muttered.

Downstairs, everyone ignored Fuller's outlandish costume. A judge seated him without question. The Chess Federation had an open bar in the next room. I sat between two Irlane on a sofa after ordering a double anything.

Commissioner Fern breezed into the room, her melony perfume announcing her arrival. Worn leather waders were all the rage in fashionable L-5, but looked out of place here. The furred critter she wore in lieu of a blouse was a class act. Fern, however, didn't realize that her living blouse was dripping snot.

"Excellent work with our hosts, Mornet," she said, walking across the room straight to me. "You are quite the diplomat."

"You didn't tell me that Fuller was a homicidal maniac."

"In my defense, he's never tried to murder anyone before. At least the Dyb' wasn't a player." She turned to stare through the glass wall at the hectare of tables sporting chess masters from across the galaxy.

Alice "The Machine" Long entered the hall. Her freshly blue-dyed skin gleamed like sapphires; her silver hair glowed with a saintly halo. She defined class by stopping to greet each of the officials in their native tongues. Was it any wonder why she was known as the pride of our species?

Hands behind her back, Commissioner Fern looked like a content captain surveying her proud ship. "Look out there. Forty-six of the top hundred chess masters in the galaxy are human. You know, there was a conference last year on the Void Drive. Over ten thousand of the greatest minds in the galaxy assembled. Only fourteen of them were human."

"Call me a species traitor, Fern, but I don't care." I said. "I ought to receive combat pay for baby-sitting this lunatic."

"You're being paid, Mornet," was all she deigned to say.

I stared at Long as she sat at her table. If only I had been assigned to the Pride of Humanity, instead . . .

Alexander Fuller won his first match. His opponent, an Irlane, got into time trouble. New Geneva rules called for white to defeat black within three hours, making a minimum of twenty moves each hour. Fuller, playing black, deployed a gonzo flank opening that completely freaked his opponent. As the first hour ticked away, the rules forced the alien to make six quick moves. The last was a blunder, losing a knight and three pawns for the price of one of Fuller's pawns. The alien promptly surrendered.

Alex the Great danced back to our suite. Once we were alone, he celebrated by hitting me over the head with an empty champagne bottle.

"Foil Boy, mess with the Wurst King again, and I'm going to put a hurting on you that will become legendary!" I growled, clasping the slight scalp laceration.

"What does that mean? The Worst King?"

"*Wurst,* you lunatic!" I accidentally shot a chair.

He stormed from the room.

Alex the Great's second game was against a human, one of the Wong sisters. He launched a premature attack, ruining Wong's position. Wong recov-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ered, though she was down material. Two hours and ten minutes into the game, Fuller threw up his hands and offered a draw. Thus Wong received .6 of a point, since she was playing black. Fuller got .4.

He locked himself in his bedroom and raved for hours. At first, he blamed me. Then he accused the batteries of his personal air conditioner of treason for failing during the game. By the end of the night (and four bottles of champagne), he'd settled on Wong's pheromones as the cause for the draw.

I called around until I found my lunatic longer-lasting batteries. A call to the concierge sent a flunkie out to fetch them. Somewhere, no doubt, an auditor for the Chess Federation spontaneously combusted after viewing our room-service bill.

Days stressed away.

After midnight, the Irlane sentry at the elevators changed. Tock'la'dall was a student who worked part-time with the cops to pay for his quest of a Scholar's Degree, awarded by Irlane universities upon completion of a seventy-year class load.

I checked the hallway twice before easing down the corridor to the foyer. With concentration, I could carry my bag without it clinking.

"And how is the genius tonight?" asked the alien.

"Asleep. I find it difficult to carry on a conversation with someone reading two books. Just because you *have* two brains, doesn't mean you have to rub it in my face."

"Brain envy?" The alien folded its upper arms behind its broad back. The readers clacked against Tock's shell.

"Smart-ass alien!"

Ever quick to laugh, Tock' stomped his feet. The alien opened his belt pouch. I transferred two bottles of Nok champagne and a fifth of Martian scotch from my bag to his. On the room service tab, the booze was valued at nine hundred bucks. My student/cop/fence slithered a tentacle into the pouch, withdrawing a Nok fifty dollar banknote.

I almost laughed, being reduced to crime because the phone company had upped their prices over the weekend. Now, a one-way, one-minute call home cost fifty-five hundred dollars.

It was the seventh day of the tourney. My hands trembled all the time.

Tock' shifted. "I saw him play against Tsk'la'nock yesterday. Extraordinary. Sacrificing his queen like that . . . why is he covered with bandages?"

I stared at the alien. Its forest of eyestalks atop its melon-shaped head were bending to the rear. The frigging Irlane was still reading the two books behind his back!

"Alex the Great suffers from Pork Rind Skin Syndrome," I replied.

"Pork Rhine? Pork is pig meat and Rhine is a river on Earth," said Tock' smugly. "Humans tend toward the descriptive when naming diseases, therefore Pork Rhine is a river pig whose skin resembles the condition."

"Your logic is flawless." That was the nice thing about being an inferior species. Most aliens figured we were too stupid to ridicule them.

Those alien mouths opened; stubby tendrils surrounding the orifices rippled. "Did you hear about Alice Long? She drew her third match today, against a Duccal, of all things! First time in her career she has drawn three games in a row."

Instead of keeping an eye on my ward, I had watched Long play in that methodic fashion that earned her the nickname—The Machine. I'd noticed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that the woman kept glancing at Alex, who sat at a nearby table. She lost her concentration every time. My ward had probably been farting, or worse.

"With that draw," the alien continued, "Long has dropped to two wins and five draws—4.6 points. She may not win this tournament."

"And Fuller has five points. That ties him with your Len'na."

"Mine?"

"He's an Irlane. Species pride and all that."

Eye stalks bent forward. "He is not a member of my *Niiji*. He represents Ren'ta'la *Niiji*. That is on the other side of the galaxy."

I shook my head. Aliens simply didn't get it. "Yeah, there's always that."

I strolled back to the suite, feeling a depression settle in my marrow. So, the Wurst King counted his growing fortune. One more day, just one more. The 4200 from the Chess Federation was registered on bankcards I received daily. Seven hundred in assorted Nok banknotes represented my profit from looting the honor bar.

All for a frigging phone call!

I woke with a headache. Room service arrived with breakfast and a stack of hardcopy.

"I notice there's no bacon, no sausage on the menu," I said to the nervous assistant manager poised in the doorway.

"Too expensive to import from Nok," he whispered, one eye on Alex's door. "And the local sources of meat are unacceptable to the human palate."

That ray of sunshine brightened my day. "Ever heard of the Howard System, the second stop on the Tal'nek Circuit? It's human-owned these days. I make the best sausages and hams in this neck of the galaxy. We can deliver a ton of beef or pork products to your doorstep for as little as 68,000 Nok dollars." I whipped out one of my smart cards. A price list scrolled down the back of the business card.

The Wurst King strikes again!

Foil Boy emerged from his bedroom, standing over the cart, eating pancakes and scrambled eggs with his aluminum-gloved hands.

"Wash your hands before the match." I said. "Dag'mon filed an official complaint about the filth on your gloves yesterday. You could be fined a tenth of a point. It'd be a stupid way to lose."

My ward grumbled something about fluoridated water being an interstellar feline conspiracy aimed at him personally.

I nodded politely while I sorted through a stack of documents. A memo from Commissioner Fern emerged. I scanned it. My stomach cramped.

"Your Dyb' opponent for today has dropped out due to a skin infection. So they have scheduled you to go against . . ." I sidled toward the door, ready to flee his rage. "You'll be facing Long today."

Instead of exploding, all he said was, "Cool," as he stuffed a pancake into his mouth, syrup dribbling on the floor.

"You're facing The Machine," I said, uneasy about his lack of a reaction.

"This is my day," replied Foil Boy.

Today would be my day, too. My eighth bankcard would be waiting for me when we got back from the match. I could call home by six, have a bank draft in my hand by midnight.

Big score for the Wurst King!

"Well?" shrieked Alex the Great, wrapping his absurd cloak around him, storming toward the hallway. I scrambled in his wake.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The lobby was a madhouse. News about Long facing Fuller had just hit the media. Reporters snapped like starving sharks. I escorted Foil Boy into a private corridor. Suddenly, the reporters vanished. Long arrived to hold court in the lobby, resplendent in a thin coat of spray-on lingerie and thigh-high Cossack boots.

"Have you seen pictures of the bitch when she first started playing pro?" hissed Fuller. His right hand gripped my shoulders, fingers digging like dull knives.

I tried to tear my gaze away, but it was locked on the Pride of Humanity. Her long, shapely legs were works of art.

"Shy little thing. I played at her first tourney as a pro. She was *fat* then. At night, she'd sit in the bar, nursing a beer, vainly waiting for somebody to talk to her. As closing time approached, she'd order a dozen shots of single malt. She'd down one a minute, drawing the attention of all the losers who didn't want to go home alone."

As if in response to Fuller's story, Galaxy Master Alice Long stood on a chair in the middle of the lobby, her long nails gesturing as she answered each reporter in turn.

"This isn't her day," Alex said, entering the pompously titled Chamber of Competition. People hustled to get out of his path.

Foil Boy played white. As soon as he reached his table, he got the nod from a passing judge. With a slap, he started the clock, pushing his queen's knight pawn. A second slap started Long's time ticking away. Pulling his hood tight around his face, he slumped in his seat.

Alice Long arrived ten minutes later. Luminous silver-dyed eyes swept the room as long fingers played with her sculpted silver hair. How could anyone play chess watching those breasts across the table? She sat, ignoring Fuller until her fingers touched my ward's hand.

My jaw dropped. Foil Boy acknowledged the touch with a grin, rousing a laugh from Long. Foil crinkled as he smiled.

I scooted down the line of one-way mirrors, seeking the best angle to watch her. So did forty others.

Long slid her queen's pawn with languid grace. Bang, bang, bang. Ten lightning moves developed their forces. Foil Boy controlled the center of the board. Bang, bang, bang. Pawns, then knights, died. No sooner had that bloodbath occurred than Long launched a queen-bishop-knight assault, stripping away Alex's knight and the pawn covering his king.

Commissioner Fern appeared at my side. "She carries his picture in that locket around her neck," Fern said with a low whisper.

"They were a *couple?*" I asked. "I would have pegged Foil Boy with the likes of Lizzie Borden, not Long."

"She refuses to say a word about him. As soon as this round is over, I need to talk to you about the room service bill."

I shrugged. "Sure thing. Did Alex the Great try to order a gun again?"

Bang, bang, bang. There was a rapid exchange on the queen-side flank that ended with Foil Boy sacrificing a rook to check Long. She froze, taking ten full minutes studying the board before she spurned the sacrifice, moving her king to safety.

"The Machine is famous for ignoring attacks while preparing for her own victory," murmured the Commissioner. "When this match was announced, the Senate of Nok announced their government would close for the duration of the game."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She's their favorite daughter," I observed.

"She's the pride of our species," countered Fern. "Doesn't make *sense* she'd ever be *his* lover!"

Bang, bang, bang; a rook trade started a frenzy of movement. Their positions made no sense to me.

"This makes no sense to me," my banker had announced last year.

I had been waiting for almost an hour in the loan officer's office. I was too irritated to answer.

"I studied your proposal, Citizen Mornet. The Dyb' do not import beef or pork anywhere in the Toolina Gathering."

"The reason nobody exports meat products to the Dyb' is the cost of *haulage*. They'd have to pay a thousand dollars to transport a kilo of sausage from Sol or Nok System to the closest Dyb' world. From Howard, it would cost less than fifty bucks. There has never been an independent human world closer to the Toolina Gathering than we are."

"There would be import licenses to get from the Dyb'," grumbled the banker.

"That's a given. I'll be leaving for Hos'in Polis shortly. The Dyb' Trade Commission maintains an office there."

"But it doesn't make *sense*. You'll be gambling everything. Your assets will be so leveraged that the slightest set-back will mean bankruptcy." The banker shuffled forms on his computer screen.

"You don't become Wurst King by playing it safe."

"It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't make sense," repeated the Commissioner.

"Would you stop saying that," I snapped. My nose kept touching the one-way glass, so intent was my study of the game. I'd almost forgotten Long's breasts.

"It's like they're each playing different games. Why don't they attack each other?"

White's reduced forces shepherded a pawn on the queen's file down the board. Meanwhile, black escorted her king's rook pawn toward its eventual queening.

The entire chamber grew quiet. Players stopped their own games to stand and stare. Nowhere had the other games advanced beyond a dozen moves, yet here the galaxy's two top competitors surpassed forty moves.

Suddenly, Long's queen slid the width of the board. Check! Foil Boy moved his king. Long responded by shifting her last bishop. Fuller's chair squeaked back from the table. Commentators hunched over their screens, cyber-pens forming arrows and circles for the benefit of the billions of viewers across the galaxy.

Long checked my ward a dozen times, chivvying the white king until it found shelter. She flicked her queen onto the back rank. One more move and her pawn would queen. Foil Boy could do nothing about it.

Nor did he seem to care. Alex the Great moved his queen, not for the easy check, but along the diagonal.

Long's spine snapped straight. Her full lips stretched, nearly vanishing. She reached for her queen, then stopped. For an eternity, her hand froze above the board. The birds tattooed on her knuckles appeared ready to fly away. With glacial celerity, she pushed her pawn to queen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alex the Great shifted his bishop. Check. Alice smiled as her first queen took it. Smiled harder as his queen vanquished hers. Check. Her king moved; her lips grew fuller. Her hand stayed atop the timer after she slapped it off. Her posture gradually softened.

Foil Boy ate her bishop. Check. Her king responded. He pushed his pawn to the end rank—two queens versus one. He rose, and without stopping his clock, walked from the table, flapping his cape.

Alice smacked the clock for him, then tipped her king in surrender. As she rose to bow toward the receding Brendon Alexander Fuller, every camera in the chamber was on her. Even losing, she knew how to win.

An Irlane walked by, talking to a human scurrying to remain at the alien's side. Handheld chess games in each of its four mitts, the alien pointed with its mouth tendrils. "You see," said the alien, "he planned this fourteen moves ago with the knight to D5. He forced the entire end game."

"Don't you have a job, Citizen Mornet?" asked Commissioner Fern, nudging me.

I took a short-cut through a staff corridor to reach the opposite side of the auditorium. Left or right? I couldn't be more than thirty seconds behind my ward. I guessed left, toward the elevators. Running full tilt, I rounded a corner and smacked into an adult Irlane whose exo-skeleton stopped me cold.

Twenty minutes later, after I regained consciousness, I staggered into the lobby. Only fainted once on the way to the suite. Foil Boy wasn't there. How much trouble could a lunatic wrapped in aluminum foil, wearing a thirty-kilo portable cooler, get into, anyway?

My latest bankcard was on the desk. I grabbed it, stuffing my future into the moneybelt. Took one step toward the door before I fainted again.

Woke in the hospital. Pesky concussion.

Fern stormed into my room. "Where *is* HE?"

"Somewhere on Hos'in?" I guessed, rubbing my eyes until the double vision surrendered.

"First, you let him order sixty-eight thousand dollars worth of room service in one week. Now, you lose him! Idiot!"

"You said let the loon have anything he wanted," I responded meekly, the world spinning.

"Anything, not EVERYthing! My Lord, he ordered 108 liters of alcohol in seven days! You're fired! And don't even *think* about trying to bill us for this medical expense!"

My ex-employer stormed out the door. A human nurse and an Irlane doctor assured me that the Irlane responsible for my cracked skull had contacted the authorities. The *Niiji* would take care of all the expenses, including per diem cash to express the government's regret about the accident.

The generous offer eased my anxiety almost as much as the painkillers.

Two days later, Brandon Alexander Fuller was discovered at the bottom of the same elevator shaft he'd pushed the Dyb' down. Nobody else found that suspicious.

Irlane medicos declared the comatose Foil Boy salvageable, though it would take a decade to repair the damage. Until such time as he could express his will, the aliens granted Alex full citizenship in the Hos'in *Niiji*, qualifying him for free medical treatment.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The tourney went on; Foil Boy's "accident" guaranteed the programming the highest ratings in history. Alice Long won the tournament with a score of 6.4, netting forty million in prize money. Foil Boy's 6.0 earned him third place and ten million bucks.

Nothing speeded my recovery more than the medicos wheeling the comatose Fuller into my room. I was out of the room an hour later, dizzy, but grateful for the escape.

As I returned to the Hyatt, I bumped into a film crew surrounding Alice Long. I detoured up a staircase in the plaza to observe while a human touched up her makeup. Long wore nothing but rainbow lace. Everyone scattered. The lights hit her. I was captivated by the angelic glow of her robin-egg blue face.

Cupped in her hands was a slab of something. I envied its plastic wrapping. To be touched by those long delicate fingers . . .

"Hello," she said to the camera with a lover's voice, "I'm Galaxy Master Alice Long, and I love *tock'klee,* the hottest delicacy in Irlane space." She tilted the package toward the camera.

"Mmmm, and we're lucky enough to have a friend in the business. Mul'te'-ta Agricultural Commune presents *tock'klee* prepared specially for humans. This taste sensation is pasteurized, processed, genuine, cheese-like food product. And if it says *food* on the label, you know it must be good."

My jaw dropped. If it says food on the label?

She set the square of *tock'klee* on a table, turning to expose a whiteboard with chemical equations scribbled over it. With practiced ease, Long led the audience through an explanation of how the alien compound was injected with enzymes that broke down the *'klee* into digestible amino acids inside the human stomach.

An Irlane appeared at my side. The alien's eyestalks stood erect. "She excels at the dissemination of data, does she not?" it asked.

Dissemination? Uppity aliens and their frigging vocabularies!

"Know how much she's getting paid?" I asked.

"We are paying her sixty million for the advertising campaign."

My turn to snap to attention. "Exactly what is *'klee?*"

"It is a mold, a chance discovery on my part as I studied my colony's flora for possible medical applications. It surprised me when my peers deemed it a foodstuff of distinction. If we can interest the human market . . ." The alien entrepreneur gave the universal sigh of ambition.

I reached into my pocket to produce the last of my biz cards. "We're in the same business. I'm here trying to sell human food to the Dyb'."

The Irlane stomped its feet. "While I was growing up, a popular curse was 'Go do business with a Dyb'."

"I can sympathize. Tell me, have you ever tasted a mettwurst?"

The alien studied my card. Had the creature known what a meat product was, it might have been impressed that my company produced over eighty varieties.

"Ever tasted icy *'klee* on a stick?"

I shook my head. "Perhaps we should get together, talk some business. I could offer advice on how to market your *'klee* to my people. I come from the Howard system. We're a small world, but since we are in the middle of the Tal'neek Circuit and a hundred light years closer than Sol or Nok, you might want to test-market your product on my world."

The alien produced an individually wrapped slice of *'klee* from one of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

myriad bags hanging from its broad belt. Its plastic wrap was greasy. Donning my bravest face, I consumed the sample. It tasted of cream and hickory smoke, with a hint of cinnamon. Delightful, except that the *'klee* stuck to my teeth, the roof of my mouth, and my tongue.

AND IT WOULDN'T COME OFF!

(Later, I would spend four hours flossing and brushing after scraping my tongue, gums, and teeth with a knife.)

"Tasty and . . . uh, unique," I observed.

"Please be so kind as to be my guest at a dinner I am giving tonight for Galaxy Master Long." The alien said. "I know so few humans. I fear she might find the company of my peers . . . daunting."

"Other than Long, I'll be the only human there?"

"Your species is *so* difficult to meet, to understand!" The alien gave me the time and place of the soiree before hustling downstairs.

I remained, leaning against a banister. The crew finished their filming. Galaxy Master Long perched on a chair, her beautiful face as blank as a TV after you turn it off.

For the longest time, I studied her, as if in her flawless blue skin and bottomless silver eyes, I could find the true meaning of my week in hell.

Then I smiled. To hell with it! The Wurst King was going to strike big *tonight!* O

Chat Online
with your favorite authors!

Spider Robinson **July 11 @ 9:00 p.m. EST**
. . . holds **Callahan's Key** (The new Callahan novel from Bantam).

Meet the Brazen Hussies July 25 @ 9:00 p.m. EST Pat Murphy, Lisa Goldstein, and **Michaela Roessner**

Hugo Nominees **August 8 @ 9:00 p.m. EST**
Harry Turtledove, Ian R. MacLeod, James Patrick Kelly, Jerry Oltion, Adam-Troy Castro, and **Kage Baker**

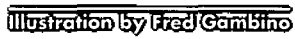
More Hugo Nominees **August 22 @ 9:00 p.m. EST**
Connie Willis, Mike Resnick, Michael Swanwick, Eleanor Arnason, and **Tom Purdom**

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.analogsf.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Asimov's Science Fiction* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RADIANT GREEN STAR

Lucius Shepard



Lucius Shepard, who has set his exotic fiction all over the globe, now finds himself living and working in Monterey, California. The latest story by this Hugo- and Nebula-award winning author takes place in a lush and decadent Vietnam of the future.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Several months before my thirteenth birthday, my mother visited me in a dream and explained why she had sent me to live with the circus seven years before. The dream was a Mitsubishi, I believe, its style that of the Moonflower series of biochips, which set the standard for pornography in those days; it had been programmed to activate once my testosterone production reached a certain level, and it featured a voluptuous Asian woman to whose body my mother had apparently grafted the image of her own face. I imagined she must have been in a desperate hurry and thus forced to use whatever materials fell to hand; yet, taking into account the Machiavellian intricacies of the family history, I later came to think that her decision to alter a pornographic chip might be intentional, designed to provoke Oedipal conflicts that would imbue her message with a heightened urgency.

In the dream, my mother told me that when I was eighteen I would come into the trust created by my maternal grandfather, a fortune that would make me the wealthiest man in Viet Nam. Were I to remain in her care, she feared my father would eventually coerce me into assigning control of the trust to him, whereupon he would have me killed. Sending me to live with her old friend Vang Ky was the one means she had of guaranteeing my safety. If all went as planned, I would have several years to consider whether it was in my best interests to claim the trust or to forswear it and continue my life in secure anonymity. She had faith that Vang would educate me in a fashion that would prepare me to arrive at the proper decision.

Needless to say, I woke from the dream in tears. Vang had informed me not long after my arrival at his door that my mother was dead, and that my father was likely responsible for her death; but this fresh evidence of his perfidy, and of her courage and sweetness, mingled though it was with the confusions of intense eroticism, renewed my bitterness and sharpened my sense of loss. I sat the rest of the night with only the eerie music of tree frogs to distract me from despair, which roiled about in my brain as if it were a species of sluggish life both separate from and inimical to my own.

The next morning, I sought out Vang and told him of the dream and asked what I should do. He was sitting at the desk in the tiny cluttered trailer that served as his home and office, going over the accounts: a frail man in his late sixties with close-cropped gray hair, dressed in a white open-collared shirt and green cotton trousers. He had a long face—especially long from cheekbones to jaw—and an almost feminine delicacy of feature, a combination of characteristics that lent him a sly, witchy look; but though he was capable of slyness, and though at times I suspected him of possessing supernatural powers, at least as regards his ability to ferret out my misdeeds, I perceived him at the time to be an inwardly directed soul who felt misused by the world and whose only interests, apart from the circus, were a love of books and calligraphy. He would occasionally take a pipe of opium, but was otherwise devoid of vices, and it strikes me now that while he had told me of his family and his career in government (he said he still maintained those connections), of a life replete with joys and passionate errors, he was now in the process of putting all that behind him and withdrawing from the world of the senses.

"You must study the situation," he said, shifting in his chair, a movement that shook the wall behind him, disturbing the leaflets stacked in the cabinet above his head and causing one to sail down toward the desk; he batted it away, and for an instant it floated in the air before me, as if held by the hand of a spirit, a detailed pastel rendering of a magnificent tent—a thou-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sand times more magnificent than the one in which we performed—and a hand-lettered legend proclaiming the imminent arrival of the Radiant Green Star Circus.

"You must learn everything possible about your father and his associates," he went on. "Thus you will uncover his weaknesses and define his strengths. But first and foremost, you must continue to live. The man you become will determine how best to use the knowledge you have gained, and you mustn't allow the pursuit of your studies to rise to the level of obsession, or else his judgment will be clouded. Of course, this is easier to do in theory than in practice. But if you set about it in a measured way, you will succeed."

I asked how I should go about seeking the necessary information, and he gestured with his pen at another cabinet, one with a glass front containing scrapbooks and bundles of computer paper; beneath it, a marmalade cat was asleep atop a broken radio, which—along with framed photographs of his wife, daughter, and grandson, all killed, he'd told me, in an airline accident years before—rested on a chest of drawers.

"Start there," he said. "When you are done with those, my friends in the government will provide us with your father's financial records and other materials."

I took a cautious step toward the cabinet—stacks of magazines and newspapers and file boxes made the floor of the trailer difficult to negotiate—but Vang held up a hand to restrain me. "First," he said, "you must live. We will put aside a few hours each day for you to study, but before all else you are a member of my troupe. Do your chores. Afterward we will sit down together and make a schedule."

On the desk, in addition to his computer, were a cup of coffee topped with a mixture of sugar and egg, and a plastic dish bearing several slices of melon. He offered me a slice and sat with his hands steepled on his stomach, watching me eat. "Would you like time alone to honor your mother?" he asked. "I suppose we can manage without you for a morning."

"Not now," I told him. "Later, though . . ."

I finished the melon, laid the rind on his plate, and turned to the door, but he called me back.

"Philip," he said, "I cannot remedy the past, but I can assure you to a degree as to the future. I have made you my heir. One day the circus will be yours. Everything I own will be yours."

I peered at him, not quite certain that he meant what he said, even though his words had been plain.

"It may not seem a grand gift," he said. "But perhaps you will discover that it is more than it appears."

I thanked him effusively, but he grimaced and waved me to silence—he was not comfortable with displays of affection. Once again he told me to see to my chores.

"Attend to the major as soon as you're able," he said. "He had a difficult night. I know he would be grateful for your company."

Radiant Green Star was not a circus in the tradition of the spectacular traveling shows of the previous century. During my tenure, we never had more than eight performers and only a handful of exhibits, exotics that had been genetically altered in some fashion: a pair of miniature tigers with hands instead of paws, a monkey with a vocabulary of thirty-seven words, and the like. The entertainments we presented were unsophisticated; we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could not compete with those available in Hanoi or Hue or Saigon, or, for that matter, those accessible in the villages. But the villagers perceived us as a link to a past they revered, and found in the crude charm of our performances a sop to their nostalgia—it was as if we carried the past with us, and we played to that illusion, keeping mainly to rural places that appeared on the surface to be part of another century. Even when the opportunity arose, Vang refused to play anywhere near large population centers because—he said—of the exorbitant bribes and licensing fees demanded by officials in such areas. Thus for the first eighteen years of my life, I did not venture into a city, and I came to know my country much as a tourist might, driving ceaselessly through it, isolated within the troupe. We traversed the north and central portions of Viet Nam in three battered methane-powered trucks, one of which towed Vang's trailer, and erected our tents in pastures and school yards and soccer fields, rarely staying anywhere longer than a few nights. On occasion, to accommodate a private celebration sponsored by a wealthy family, we would join forces with another troupe; but Vang was reluctant to participate in such events, because being surrounded by so many people caused our featured attraction to become agitated, thus imperiling his fragile health.

Even today the major remains a mystery to me. I have no idea if he was who he claimed to be; nor, I think, did *he* know—his statements concerning identity were usually vague and muddled, and the only point about which he was firm was that he had been orphaned as a young boy, raised by an uncle and aunt, and, being unmarried, was the last of his line. Further, it's unclear whether his claims were the product of actual memory, delusion, or implantation. For the benefit of our audiences, we let them stand as truth, and billed him as Major Martin Boyette, the last surviving POW of the American War, now well over a hundred years old and horribly disfigured, both conditions the result of experiments in genetic manipulation by means of viruses—this the opinion of a Hanoi physician who treated the major during a bout of illness. Since such unregulated experiments were performed with immoderate frequency throughout Southeast Asia after the turn of the century, it was not an unreasonable conclusion. Major Boyette himself had no recollection of the process that had rendered him so monstrous and—if one were to believe him—so long-lived.

We were camped that day near the village of Cam Lo, and the tent where the major was quartered had been set up at the edge of the jungle. He liked the jungle, liked its noise and shadow, the sense of enclosure it provided—he dreaded the prospect of being out in the open, so much so that whenever we escorted him to the main tent, we would walk with him, holding umbrellas to prevent him from seeing the sky and to shield him from the sight of god and man. But once inside the main tent, as if the formal structure of a performance neutralized his aversion to space and scrutiny, he showed himself pridefully, walking close to the bleachers, causing children to shy away and women to cover their eyes. His skin hung from his flesh in voluminous black folds (he was African-American), and when he raised his arms, the folds beneath them spread like the wings of a bat; his face, half-hidden by a layering of what appeared to be leather shawls, was the sort of uncanny face one might see emerging from a whorled pattern of bark, roughly human in form, yet animated by a force that seems hotter than the human soul, less self-aware. Bits of phosphorescence drifted in the darks of his eyes. His only clothing was a ragged gray shift, and he hobbled along with the aid of a staff

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cut from a sapling papaya—he might have been a prophet escaped after a term in hell, charred and magical and full of doom. But when he began to speak, relating stories from the American War, stories of ill-fated Viet Cong heroes and the supernatural forces whose aid they enlisted, all told in a deep rasping voice, his air of suffering and menace evaporated, and his ugliness became an intrinsic article of his power, as though he were a poet who had sacrificed superficial glamour for the ability to express more eloquently the beauty within. The audiences were won over, their alarm transformed to delight, and they saluted him with enthusiastic applause . . . but they never saw him as I did that morning: a decrepit hulk given to senile maundering and moments of bright terror when startled by a sound from outside the tent. Sitting in his own filth, too weak or too uncaring to move.

When I entered the tent, screwing up my face against the stench, he tucked his head into his shoulder and tried to shroud himself in the fetid folds of his skin. I talked softly, gentling him as I might a frightened animal, in order to persuade him to stand. Once he had heaved up to his feet, I bathed him, sloshing buckets of water over his convulsed surfaces; when at length I was satisfied that I'd done my best, I hauled in freshly cut boughs and made him a clean place to sit. Unsteadily, he lowered himself onto the boughs and started to eat from the bowl of rice and vegetables I had brought for his breakfast, using his fingers to mold bits of food into a ball and inserting it deep into his mouth—he often had difficulty swallowing.

"Is it good?" I asked. He made a growly noise of affirmation. In the half-dark, I could see the odd points of brilliance in his eyes.

I hated taking care of the major (this may have been the reason Vang put me in charge of him). His physical state repelled me, and though the American War had long since ceased to be a burning issue, I resented his purported historical reality—being half American, half Vietnamese, I felt doubly afflicted by the era he represented. But that morning, perhaps because my mother's message had inoculated me against my usual prejudices, he fascinated me. It was like watching a mythological creature feed, a chimera or a manticore, and I thought I perceived in him the soul of the inspired storyteller, the luminous half-inch of being that still burned behind the corroded ruin of his face.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

He swallowed and gazed at me with those haunted foxfire eyes. I repeated the question.

"Philip," he said tonelessly, giving equal value to both syllables, as if the name were a word he'd been taught but did not understand.

I wondered if he was—as Vang surmised—an ordinary man transformed into a monster, pumped full of glorious tales and false memories, all as a punishment for some unguessable crime or merely on a cruel whim. Or might he actually *be* who he claimed? A freak of history, a messenger from another time whose stories contained some core truth, just as the biochip had contained my mother's truth? All I knew for certain was that Vang had bought him from another circus, and that his previous owner had found him living in the jungle in the province of Quan Tri, kept alive by the charity of people from a nearby village who considered him the manifestation of a spirit.

Once he had finished his rice, I asked him to tell me about the war, and he launched into one of his mystical tales; but I stopped him, saying, "Tell me about the real war. The war you fought in."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He fell silent, and when at last he spoke, it was not in the resonant tones with which he entertained our audiences, but in an effortful whisper.

"We came to the firebase in . . . company strength. Tenth of May. Nineteen sixty-seven. The engineers had just finished construction and . . . and . . . there was still . . ." He paused to catch his breath. "The base was near the Laotian border. Overlooking a defoliated rubber plantation. Nothing but bare red earth in front of us . . . and wire. But at our rear . . . the jungle . . . it was too close. They brought in artillery to clear it. Lowered the batteries to full declension. The trees all toppled in the same direction . . . as if they'd been pushed down by the sweep . . . of an invisible hand."

His delivery, though still labored, grew less halting, and he made feeble gestures to illustrate the tale, movements that produced a faint slithering as folds of his skin rubbed together; the flickerings in his pupils grew more and more pronounced, and I half-believed his eyes were openings onto a battlefield at night, a place removed from us by miles and time.

"Because of the red dirt, the base was designated Firebase Ruby. But the dirt wasn't the color of rubies, it was the red of drying blood. For months we held the position with only token resistance. We'd expected serious opposition, and it was strange to sit there day after day with nothing to do except send out routine patrols. I tried to maintain discipline, but it was an impossible task. Everyone malingered. Drug use was rampant. If I'd gone by the book I could have brought charges against every man on the base. But what was the point? War was not truly being waged. We were engaged in a holding action. Policy was either directionless or misguided. And so I satisfied myself by maintaining a semblance of discipline as the summer heat and the monsoon melted away the men's resolve.

"October came, the rains slackened. There was no hint of increased enemy activity, but I had a feeling something big was on the horizon. I spoke to my battalion commander. He felt the same way. I was told we had intelligence suggesting that the enemy planned a fall and winter campaign building up to Tet. But no one took it seriously. I don't think I took it seriously myself. I was a professional soldier who'd been sitting idle for six months, and I was spoiling for a fight. I was so eager for engagement I failed to exercise good judgment. I ignored the signs, I . . . I refused . . . I . . ."

He broke off and pawed at something above him in the air—an apparition, perhaps; then he let out an anguished cry, covered his face with his hands, and began to shake like a man wracked by fever.

I sat with him until, exhausted, he lapsed into a fugue, staring dully at the ground. He was so perfectly still, if I had come across him in the jungle, I might have mistaken him for a root system that had assumed a hideous anthropomorphic shape. Only the glutinous surge of his breath opposed this impression. I didn't know what to think of his story. The plain style of its narration had been markedly different from that of his usual stories, and this lent it credibility; yet I recalled that whenever questioned about his identity, he would respond in a similar fashion. However, the ambiguous character of his personal tragedy did not diminish my new fascination with his mystery. It was as if I had been dusting a vase that rested on my mantelpiece, and, for the first time, I'd turned it over to inspect the bottom and found incised there a labyrinthine design, one that drew my eye inward along its black circuit, promising that should I be able to decipher the hidden character at its center, I would be granted a glimpse of something ultimately bleak and at the same time ultimately alluring. Not a secret, but rather the source of secrets.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not truth, but the ground upon which truth and its opposite were raised. I was a mere child—half a child, at any rate—thus I have no real understanding of how I arrived at this recognition, illusory though it may have been. But I can state with absolute surety why it seemed important at the time: I had a powerful sense of connection with the major, and, accompanying this, the presentiment that his mystery was somehow resonant with my own.

Except for my new program of study, researching my father's activities, and the enlarged parameters of my relationship with Major Boyette, whom I visited whenever I had the opportunity, over the next several years my days were much the same as ever, occupied by touring, performing (I functioned as a clown and an apprentice knife thrower), by all the tediums and pleasures that arose from life in Radiant Green Star. There were, of course, other changes. Vang grew increasingly frail and withdrawn, the major's psychological state deteriorated, and four members of the troupe left and were replaced. We gained two new acrobats, Kim and Kai, pretty Korean sisters aged seven and ten respectively—orphans trained by another circus—and Tranh, a middle-aged, moonfaced man whose potbelly did not hamper in the slightest his energetic tumbling and pratfalls. But to my mind, the most notable of the replacements was Vang's niece, Tan, a slim, quiet girl from Hue with whom I immediately fell in love.

Tan was nearly seventeen when she joined us, a year older than I, an age difference that seemed unbridgeable to my teenage sensibilities. Her shining black hair hung to her waist, her skin was the color of sandalwood dusted with gold, and her face was a perfect cameo in which the demure and the sensual commingled. Her father had been in failing health, and both he and his wife had been uploaded into a virtual community hosted by the Sony AI—Tan had then become her uncle's ward. She had no actual performing skills, but dressed in glittery revealing costumes, she danced and took part in comic skits and served as one of the targets for our knife thrower, a taciturn young man named Dat who was billed as James Bond Cochise. Dat's other target, Mei, a chunky girl of Taiwanese extraction who also served as the troupe's physician, having some knowledge of herbal medicine, would come prancing out and stand at the board, and Dat would plant his knives within a centimeter of her flesh; but when Tan took her place, he would exercise extreme caution and set the knives no closer than seven or eight inches away, a contrast that amused our audiences no end.

For months after her arrival, I hardly spoke to Tan, and then only for some utilitarian purpose; I was too shy to manage a normal conversation. I wished with all my heart that I was eighteen and a man, with the manly confidence that, I assumed, naturally flowed from having attained the age. As things stood I was condemned by my utter lack of self-confidence to admire her from afar, to imagine conversations and other intimacies, to burn with all the frustration of unrequited lust. But then, one afternoon, while I sat in the grass outside Vang's trailer, poring over some papers dealing with my father's investments, she approached, wearing loose black trousers and a white blouse, and asked what I was doing.

"I see you reading every day," she said. "You are so dedicated to your studies. Are you preparing for the university?"

We had set up our tents outside Bien Pho, a village some sixty miles south of Hanoi, on the grassy bank of a wide, meandering river whose water showed black beneath a pewter sky. Dark green conical hills with rocky out-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

croppings hemmed in the spot, and it was shaded here and there by smallish trees with crooked trunks and puffs of foliage at the ends of their corkscrew branches. The main tent had been erected at the base of the nearest hill and displayed atop it a pennant bearing the starry emblem of our troupe. Everyone else was inside, getting ready for the night's performance. It was a brooding yet tranquil scene, like a painting on an ancient Chinese scroll, but I noticed none of it—the world had shrunk to the bubble of grass and air that enclosed the two of us.

Tan sat beside me, crossed her legs in a half-lotus, and I caught her scent. Not perfume, but the natural musky yield of her flesh. I did my best to explain the purpose of my studies, the words rushing out as if I were unburdening myself of an awful secret. Which was more-or-less the case. No one apart from Vang knew what I was doing, and because his position relative to the task was tutelary, not that of a confidante, I felt oppressed, isolated by the responsibility I bore. Now it seemed that by disclosing the sad facts bracketing my life, I was acting to reduce their power over me. And so, hoping to exorcise them completely, I told her about my father.

"His name is William Ferrance," I said, hastening to add that I'd taken Ky for my own surname. "His father emigrated to Asia in the Nineties, during the onset of *doi moi* (this the Vietnamese equivalent of *perestroika*), and made a fortune in Saigon, adapting fleets of taxis to methane power. His son—my father—expanded the family interests. He invested in a number of construction projects, all of which lost money. He was in trouble financially when he married my mother, and he used her money to fund a casino in Danang. That allowed him to recoup most of his losses. Since then, he's established connections with the triads, Malaysian gambling syndicates, and the Bamboo Union in Taiwan. He's become an influential man, but his money's tied up. He has no room to maneuver. Should he gain control of my grandfather's estate, he'll be a very dangerous man."

"But this is so impersonal," Tan said. "Have you no memories of him?"

"Hazy ones," I said. "From all I can gather, he never took much interest in me . . . except as a potential tool. The truth is, I can scarcely remember my mother. Just the occasional moment. How she looked standing at a window. The sound of her voice when she sang. And I have a general impression of the person she was. Nothing more."

Tan looked off toward the river; some of the village children were chasing each other along the bank, and a cargo boat with a yellow sail was coming into view around the bend. "I wonder," she said. "Is it worse to remember those who've gone, or not to remember them?"

I guessed she was thinking about her parents, and I wanted to say something helpful, but the concept of uploading an intelligence, a personality, was so foreign to me, I was afraid of appearing foolish.

"I can see my mother and father whenever I want," Tan said, lowering her gaze to the grass. "I can go to a Sony office anywhere in the world and summon them with a code. When they appear they look like themselves, they sound like themselves, but I know it's not them. The things they say are always . . . appropriate. But something is missing. Some energy, some quality." She glanced up at me, and, looking into her beautiful dark eyes, I felt giddy, almost weightless. "Something dies," she went on. "I know it! We're not just electrical impulses, we can't be sucked up into a machine and live. Something dies, something important. What goes into the machine is nothing. It's only a colored shadow of what we are."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't have much experience with computers," I said.

"But you've experienced life!" She touched the back of my hand. "Can't you feel it within you? I don't know what to call it . . . a soul? I don't know. . . ."

It seemed then I could feel the presence of the thing she spoke of moving in my chest, my blood, going all through me, attached to my mind, my flesh, by an unfathomable connection, existing inside me the way breath exists inside a flute, breeding the brief, pretty life of a note, a unique tone, and then passing on into the ocean of the air. Whenever I think of Tan, how she looked that morning, I'm able to feel that delicate, tremulous thing, both temporary and eternal, hovering in the same space I occupy.

"This is too serious," she said. "I'm sorry. I've been thinking about my parents more than I should." She shook back the fall of her hair, put on a smile. "Do you play chess?"

"No," I admitted.

"You must learn! A knowledge of the game will help if you intend to wage war against your father." A regretful expression crossed her face, as if she thought she'd spoken out of turn. "Even if you don't . . . I mean . . ." Flustered, she waved her hands to dispel the awkwardness of the moment. "It's fun," she said. "I'll teach you."

I did not make a good chess player, I was far too distracted by the presence of my teacher to heed her lessons. But I'm grateful to the game, for through the movements of knights and queens, through my clumsiness and her patience, through hours of sitting with our heads bent close together, our hearts grew close. We were never merely friends—from that initial conversation on, it was apparent that we would someday take the next step in exploring our relationship, and I rarely felt any anxiety in this regard; I knew that when Tan was ready, she would tell me. For the time being, we enjoyed a kind of amplified friendship, spending our leisure moments together, our physical contact limited to hand-holding and kisses on the cheek. This is not to say that I always succeeded in conforming to those limits. Once as we lay atop Vang's trailer, watching the stars, I was overcome by her scent, the warmth of her shoulder against mine, and I propped myself up on an elbow and kissed her on the mouth. She responded, and I stealthily unbuttoned her blouse, exposing her breasts. Before I could proceed further, she sat bolt upright, holding her blouse closed, and gave me a injured look; then she slid down from the trailer and walked off into the dark, leaving me in a state of dismay and painful arousal. I slept little that night, worried that I had done permanent damage to the relationship; but the next day she acted as if nothing had happened, and we went on as before, except that I now wanted her more than ever.

Vang, however, was not so forgiving. How he knew I had taken liberties with his niece, I'm not sure—it may have been simply an incidence of his intuitive abilities; I cannot imagine that Tan told him. Whatever his sources, after our performance the next night he came into the main tent where I was practicing with my knives, hurling them into a sheet of plywood upon which the red outline of a human figure had been painted, and asked if my respect for him had dwindled to the point that I would dishonor his sister's daughter.

He was sitting in the first row of the bleachers, leaning back, resting his elbows on the row behind him, gazing at me with distaste. I was infuriated by this casual indictment, and rather than answer immediately I threw an-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other knife, placing it between the outline's arm and its waist. I walked to the board, yanked the blade free, and said without turning to him, "I haven't dishonored her."

"But surely that is your intent," he said.

Unable to contain my anger, I spun about to face him. "Were you never young? Have you never been in love?"

"Love." He let out a dry chuckle. "If you are in love, perhaps you would care to enlighten me as to its nature."

I would have liked to tell him how I felt about Tan, to explain the sense of security I found with her, the varieties of tenderness, the niceties of my concern for her, the thousand nuances of longing, the intricate complicity of our two hearts and the complex specificity of my desire, for though I wanted to lose myself in the turns of her body, I also wanted to celebrate her, enliven her, to draw out of her the sadness that sometimes weighed her down, and to have her leach my sadness from me as well—I knew this was possible for us. But I was too young and too angry to articulate these things.

"Do you love your mother?" Vang asked, and before I could respond, he said, "You have admitted that you have but a few disjointed memories of her. And, of course, a dream. Yet you have chosen to devote yourself to pursuing the dictates of that dream, to making a life that honors your mother's wishes. That is love. How can you compare this to your infatuation with Tan?"

Frustrated, I cast my eyes up to the billow of patched gray canvas overhead, to the metal rings at the peak from which Kai and Kim were nightly suspended. When I looked back to Vang, I saw that he had gotten to his feet.

"Think on it," he said. "If the time comes when you can regard Tan with the same devotion, well . . ." He made a subtle dismissive gesture with his fingers that suggested this was an unlikely prospect.

I turned to the board and hefted another knife. The target suddenly appeared evil in its anonymity, a dangerous creature with a wood-grain face and blood-red skin, and as I drew back my arm, my anger at Vang merged with the greater anger I felt at the anonymous forces that had shaped my life, and I buried the knife dead center of the head—it took all my strength to work the blade free. Glancing up, I was surprised to see Vang watching from the entrance. I had assumed that, having spoken his piece, he had returned to his trailer. He stood there for a few seconds, giving no overt sign of his mood, but I had the impression he was pleased.

When she had no other duties, Tan would assist me with my chores: feeding the exotics, cleaning out their cages, and, though she did not relish his company, helping me care for the major. I must confess I was coming to enjoy my visits with him less and less; I still felt a connection to him, and I remained curious as to the particulars of his past, but his mental slippage had grown so pronounced, it was difficult to be around him. Frequently he insisted on trying to relate the story of Firebase Ruby, but he always lapsed into terror and grief at the same point he had previously broken off the narrative. It seemed that this was a tale he was making up, not one he had been taught or programmed to tell, and that his mind was no longer capable of other than fragmentary invention. But one afternoon, as we were finishing up in his tent, he began to tell the story again, this time starting at the place where he had previously faltered, speaking without hesitancy in the deep, raspy voice he used while performing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It came to be October," he said. "The rains slackened, the snakes kept to their holes during the day, and the spiderwebs were not so thick with victims as they'd been during the monsoon. I began to have a feeling that something ominous was on the horizon, and when I communicated this sense of things to my superiors, I was told that according to intelligence, an intensification of enemy activity was expected, leading up to what was presumed to be a major offensive during the celebration of Tet. But I gave no real weight to either my feeling or to the intelligence reports. I was a professional soldier, and for six months I'd been engaged in nothing more than sitting in a bunker and surveying a wasteland of red dirt and razor wire. I was spoiling for a fight."

He was sitting on a nest of palm fronds, drenched in a spill of buttery light—we had partially unzipped the roof of the tent in order to increase ventilation—and it looked as if the fronds were an island adrift in a dark void and he a spiritual being who had been scorched and twisted by some cosmic fire, marooned in eternal emptiness.

"The evening of the Fourteenth, I sent out the usual patrols and retired to my bunker. I sat at my desk reading a paperback novel and drinking whiskey. After a time, I put down the book and began a letter to my wife. I was tipsy, and instead of the usual sentimental lines designed to make her feel secure, I let my feelings pour onto the paper, writing about the lack of discipline, my fears concerning the enemy, my disgust at the way the war was being prosecuted. I told her how much I hated Viet Nam. The ubiquitous corruption, the stupidity of the South Vietnamese government. The smell of fish sauce, the poisonous greens of the jungle. Everything. The goddamn place had been a battlefield so long, it was good for nothing else. I kept drinking, and the liquor eroded my remaining inhibitions. I told her about the treachery and ineptitude of the ARVN forces, about the fuck-ups on our side who called themselves generals."

"I was still writing when, around twenty-one hundred hours, something distracted me. I'm not sure what it was. A noise . . . or maybe a vibration. But I knew something had happened. I stepped out into the corridor and heard a cry. Then the crackling of small arms fire. I grabbed my rifle and ran outside. The VC were inside the wire. In the perimeter lights I saw dozens of diminutive men and women in black pajamas scurrying about, white stars sputtering from the muzzles of their weapons. I cut down several of them. I couldn't think how they had gotten through the wire and the minefields without alerting the sentries, but then, as I continued to fire, I spotted a man's head pop up out of the ground and realized that they had tunneled in. All that slow uneventful summer, they'd been busy beneath the surface of the earth, secretive as termites."

At this juncture the major fell prey once again to emotional collapse, and I prepared myself for the arduous process of helping him recover; but Tan kneeled beside him, took his hand, and said, "Martin? Martin, listen to me."

No one ever used the major's Christian name, except to introduce him to an audience, and I didn't doubt that it had been a long time since a woman had addressed him with tenderness. He abruptly stopped his shaking, as if the nerves that had betrayed him had been severed, and stared wonderingly at Tan. White pinprick suns flickered and died in the deep places behind his eyes.

"Where are you from, Martin?" she asked, and the major, in a dazed tone, replied, "Oakland . . . Oakland, California. But I was born up in Santa Cruz."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Santa Cruz." Tan gave the name a bell-like reading. "Is it beautiful in Santa Cruz? It sounds like a beautiful place."

"Yeah . . . it's kinda pretty. There's old-growth redwoods not far from town. And there's the ocean. It's real pretty along the ocean."

To my amazement, Tan and the major began to carry on a coherent—albeit simplistic—conversation, and I realized that he had never spoken in this fashion before. His syntax had an uncustomary informality, and his voice held the trace of an accent. I thought that Tan's gentle approach must have penetrated his tormented psyche, either reaching the submerged individual, the real Martin Boyette, or else encountering a fresh layer of delusion. It was curious to hear him talk about such commonplace subjects as foggy weather and jazz music and Mexican food, all of which he claimed could be found in good supply in Santa Cruz. Though his usual nervous tics were in evidence, a new placidity showed in his face. But, of course this state of affairs didn't last.

"I can't," he said, taking a sudden turn from the subject at hand; he shook his head, dragging folds of skin across his neck and shoulders, "I can't go back anymore. I can't go back there."

"Don't be upset, Martin," Tan said. "There's no reason for you to worry. We'll stay with you, we'll . . ."

"I don't want you to stay." He tucked his head into his shoulder so his face was hidden by a bulge of skin. "I got to get back doin' what I was doin'."

"What's that?" I asked him. "What were you doing?"

A muffled rhythmic grunting issued from his throat—laughter that went on too long to be an expression of simple mirth. It swelled in volume, trebled in pitch, becoming a signature of instability.

"I'm figurin' it all out," he said. "That's what I'm doin'. Jus' you go away now."

"Figuring out what?" I asked, intrigued by the possibility—however unlikely—that the major might have a mental life other than the chaotic, that his apparent incoherence was merely an incidental byproduct of concentration, like the smoke that rises from a leaf upon which a beam of sunlight has been focused.

He made no reply, and Tan touched my hand, signaling that we should leave. As I ducked through the tent flap, behind me the major said, "I can't go back there, and I can't be here. So jus' where's that leave me, y'know?"

Exactly what the major meant by this cryptic statement was unclear, but his words stirred something in me, reawakened me to internal conflicts that had been pushed aside by my studies and my involvement with Tan. When I had arrived to take up residence at Green Star, I was in a state of emotional upheaval, frightened, confused, longing for my mother. Yet even after I calmed down, I was troubled by the feeling that I had lost my place in the world, and it seemed this was not just a consequence of having been uprooted from my family, but that I had always felt this way, that the turbulence of my emotions had been a cloud obscuring what was a constant strain in my life. This was due in part to my mixed heritage. Though the taint associated with the children of Vietnamese mothers and American fathers (dust children, they had once been called) had dissipated since the end of the war, it had not done so entirely, and wherever the circus traveled. I would encounter people who, upon noticing the lightness of my skin and the shape of my eyes, expressed scorn and kept their distance. Further fueling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this apprehension was the paucity of my memories deriving from the years before I had come to live with Vang. Whenever Tan spoke about her childhood, she brought up friends, birthdays, uncles and cousins, trips to Saigon, dances, hundreds of details and incidents that caused my own memory to appear grossly underpopulated by comparison. Trauma was to blame, I reckoned. The shock of my mother's abandonment, however well-intended, had ripped open my mental storehouse and scattered the contents. That and the fact that I had been six when I left home and thus hadn't had time to accumulate the sort of cohesive memories that lent color to Tan's stories of Hue. But explaining it away did not lessen my discomfort, and I became fixated on the belief that no matter the nature of the freakish lightning that had sheared away my past, I would never find a cure for the sense of dislocation it had provoked, only medicines that would suppress the symptoms and mask the disease—and, that being so masked, it would grow stronger, immune to treatment, until eventually I would be possessed by it, incapable of feeling at home anywhere.

I had no remedy for these anxieties other than to throw myself with greater intensity into my studies, and with this increase in intensity came a concomitant increase in anger. I would sit at Vang's computer, gazing at photographs of my father, imagining violent resolutions to our story. I doubted that he would recognize me; I favored my mother and bore little resemblance to him, a genetic blessing for which I was grateful: he was not particularly handsome, though he was imposing, standing nearly six and a half feet tall and weighing—according to a recent medical report—two hundred and sixty-four pounds, giving the impression not of a fat man, but a massive one. His large squarish head was kept shaved, and on his left cheek was the dark blue and green tattoo of his corporate emblem—a flying fish—ringed by three smaller tattoos denoting various of his business associations. At the base of his skull was an oblong silver plate beneath which lay a number of ports allowing him direct access to a computer. Whenever he posed for a picture, he affected what I assumed he would consider a look of hauteur, but the smallness of his eyes (grayish blue) and nose and mouth in contrast to the largeness of his face caused them to be limited in their capacity to convey character and emotional temperature, rather like the features on a distant planet seen through a telescope, and as a result this particular expression came across as prim. In less formal photographs, taken in the company of one or another of his sexual partners, predominantly women, he was quite obviously intoxicated.

He owned an old French Colonial in Saigon, but spent the bulk of his time at his house in Binh Khoi, one of the flower towns—communities built at the turn of the century, intended to provide privacy and comfort for well-to-do Vietnamese whose sexual preferences did not conform to communist morality. Now that communism—if not the concept of sexual morality itself—had become quaint, a colorful patch of history dressed up with theme-park neatness to amuse the tourists, it would seem that these communities no longer had any reason to exist; yet exist they did. Their citizenry had come to comprise a kind of gay aristocracy that defined styles, set trends, and wielded significant political power. Though they maintained a rigid exclusivity, and though my father's bisexuality was motivated to a great degree—I believe—by concerns of business and status, he had managed to cajole and bribe his way into Binh Khoi, and as best I could determine, he was sincere in his attachment to the place.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The pictures taken at Binh Khoi rankled me the most—I hated to see him laughing and smiling. I would stare at those photographs, my emotions overheating, until it seemed I could focus rage into a beam and destroy any object upon which I turned my gaze. My eventual decision, I thought, would be easy to make. Anger and history, the history of his violence and greed, were making it for me, building a spiritual momentum impossible to stop. When the time came, I would avenge my mother and claim my inheritance. I knew exactly how to go about the task. My father feared no one less powerful than himself—if such a person moved against him, they would be the target of terrible reprisals—and he recognized the futility of trying to fend off an assassination attempt by anyone more powerful; thus his security was good, yet not impenetrable. The uniqueness of my situation lay in the fact that if I were able to kill him, I would as a consequence become more powerful than he or any of his connections; and so, without the least hesitancy, I began to plan his murder both in Binh Khoi and Saigon—I had schematics detailing the security systems of both homes. But in the midst of crafting the means of his death, I lost track of events that were in the process of altering the conditions attendant upon my decision.

One night not long after my seventeenth birthday, I was working at the computer in the trailer, when Vang entered and lowered himself carefully in the chair opposite me, first shooing away the marmalade cat who had been sleeping there. He wore a threadbare gray cardigan and the striped trousers from an old suit, and carried a thin folder bound in plastic. I was preoccupied with tracking my father's movements via his banking records and I acknowledged Vang's presence with a nod. He sat without speaking a while and finally said, "Forgive my intrusion, but would you be so kind as to allow me a minute of your time."

I realized he was angry, but my own anger took precedence. It was not just that I was furious with my father; I had grown weary of Vang's distant manner, his goading, his incessant demands for respect in face of his lack of respect for me. "What do you want?" I asked without looking away from the screen.

He tossed the folder onto the desk. "Your task has become more problematic."

The folder contained the personnel file of a attractive woman named Phuong Anh Nguyen whom my father had hired as a bodyguard. Much of the data concerned her considerable expertise with weapons and her reaction times, which were remarkable—it was apparent that she had been bred for her occupation, genetically enhanced. According to the file her senses were so acute, she could detect shifts in the heat patterns of the brain, subtle changes in blood pressure, heart rate, pupillary dilation, speech, all the telltales that would betray the presence of a potential assassin. The information concerning her personal life was skimpy. Though Vietnamese, she had been born in China, and had spent her life until the age of sixteen behind the walls of a private security agency, where she had received her training. Serving a variety of employers, she had killed sixteen men and women over the next five years. Several months before, she had bought out her contract from the security agency and signed on long-term with my father. Like him, she was bisexual, and, also like him, the majority of her partners were women.

I glanced up from the file to find Vang studying me with an expectant air. "Well," he said, "what do you think?"

"She's not bad-looking," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He folded his arms, made a disgusted noise.

"All right." I turned the pages of the file. "My father's upgrading his security. That means he's looking ahead to bigger things. Preparing for the day when he can claim my trust."

"Is that all you're able to extract from the document?"

From outside came voices, laughter. They passed, faded. Mei, I thought, and Tranh. It was a cool night, the air heavy with the scent of rain. The door was cracked open, and I could see darkness and thin streamers of fog. "What else is there?" I asked.

"Use your mind, won't you?" Vang let his head tip forward and closed his eyes—a formal notice of his exasperation. "Phuong would require a vast sum in order to pay off her contract. Several million, at least. Her wage is a good one, but even if she lived in poverty, which she does not, it would take her a decade or more to save sufficient funds. Where might she obtain such a sum?"

I had no idea.

"From her new employer, of course," Vang said.

"My father doesn't have that kind of money lying around."

"It seems he does. Only a very wealthy man could afford such a servant as Phuong Anh Nguyen."

I took mental stock of my father's finances, but was unable to recall an excess of cash.

"It's safe to say the money did not come from your father's business enterprises," said Vang. "We have good information on them. So we may assume he either stole it or coerced someone else into stealing it." The cat jumped up into his lap, began kneading his abdomen. "Rather than taxing your brain further," he went on, "I'll tell you what I believe has happened. He's tapped into your trust. It's much too large to be managed by one individual, and it's quite possible he's succeeded in corrupting one of the officers in charge."

"You can't be sure of that."

"No, but I intend to contact my government friends and suggest an investigation of the trust. If your father has done what I suspect, it will prevent him from doing more damage." The cat had settled on his lap; he stroked its head. "But the trust is not the problem. Even if your father has stolen from it, he can't have taken much more than was necessary to secure this woman's services. Otherwise the man who gave me this"—he gestured at the folder—"would have detected evidence of other expenditures. There'll be more than enough left to make you a powerful man. Phuong Anh Nguyen is the problem. You'll have to kill her first."

The loopy cry of a night bird cut the silence. Someone with a flashlight was crossing the pasture where the trailer rested, the beam of light slicing through layers of fog, sweeping over shrubs and patches of grass. I suggested that one woman shouldn't pose that much of a problem, no matter how efficient she was at violence.

Vang closed his eyes again. "You have not witnessed this kind of professional in action. They're fearless, totally dedicated to their work. They develop a sixth sense concerning their clients; they bond with them. You'll need to be circumspect in dealing with her."

"Perhaps she's beyond my capacity to deal with," I said after a pause. "Perhaps I'm simply too thickheaded. I should probably let it all go and devote myself to Green Star."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do as you see fit."

Vang's expression did not shift from its stoic cast, but it appeared to harden, and I could tell that he was startled. I instructed the computer to sleep and leaned back, bracing one foot against the side of the desk. "There's no need for pretense," I said. "I know you want me to kill him. I just don't understand why."

I waited for him to respond, and when he did not, I said, "You were my mother's friend—that's reason enough to wish him dead, I suppose. But I've never felt that you were *my* friend. You've given me . . . everything. Life. A place to live. A purpose. Yet whenever I try to thank you, you dismiss it out of hand. I used to think this was because you were shy, because you were embarrassed by displays of emotion. Now, I'm not sure. Sometimes it seems you find my gratitude repugnant . . . or embarrassing in a way that has nothing to do with shyness. It's as if"—I struggled to collect my thoughts "—as if you have some reason for hating my father that you haven't told me. One you're ashamed to admit. Or maybe it's something else, some piece of information you have that gives you a different perspective on the situation."

Being honest with him was both exhilarating and frightening—I felt as though I were violating a taboo—and after this speech I was left breathless and disoriented, unsure of everything I'd said, though I'd been thoroughly convinced of its truth when I said it. "I'm sorry," I told him. "I've no right to doubt you."

He started to make a gesture of dismissal such as was his habit when uncomfortable with a conversation, but caught himself and petted the cat instead. "Despite the differences in our stations, I was very close to your mother," he said. "And to your grandfather. No longer having a family of my own, I made them into a surrogate. When they died, one after the other . . . you see, your grandfather's presence, his wealth, protected your mother, and once he was gone, your father had no qualms against misusing her." He blew out a breath, like a horse, through his lips. "When they died, I lost my heart. I'd lost so much already, I was unable to bear the sorrow I felt. I retreated from the world, I rejected my emotions. In effect, I shut myself down." He put a hand to his forehead, covering his eyes. I could see he was upset, and I felt badly that I had caused these old griefs to wound him again. "I know you have suffered as a result," he went on. "You've grown up without the affection of a parent, and that is a cruel condition. I wish I could change that. I wish I could change the way I am, but the idea of risking myself, of having everything ripped away from me a third time . . . it's unbearable." His hand began to tremble; he clenched it into a fist, pressed it against the bridge of his nose. "It is I who should apologize to you. Please, forgive me."

I assured him that he need not ask for forgiveness, I honored and respected him. I had the urge to tell him I loved him, and at that moment I did—I believed now that in loving my family, in carrying out my mother's wishes, he had established his love for me. Hoping to distract him from his grief, I asked him to tell me about my grandfather, a man concerning whom I knew next to nothing, only that he had been remarkably successful in business.

Vang seemed startled by the question, but after taking a second to compose himself, he said, "I'm not sure you would have approved of him. He was a strong man, and strong men often sacrifice much that ordinary men hold

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dear in order to achieve their ends. But he loved your mother, and he loved you."

This was not the sort of detail I'd been seeking, but it was plain that Vang was still gripped by emotion, and I decided it would be best to leave him alone. As I passed behind him, I laid a hand on his shoulder. He twitched, as if burned by the touch, and I thought he might respond by covering my hand with his own. But he only nodded and made a humming noise deep in his throat. I stood there for a few beats, wishing I could think of something else to say; then I bid him good night and went off into the darkness to look for Tan.

One morning, about a month after this conversation, in the little seaside town of Vung Tao, Dat quit the circus following an argument with Vang, and I was forced that same evening to assume the role of James Bond Cochise. The prospect of performing the entire act in public—I had previously made token appearances along with Dat—gave rise to some anxiety, but I was confident in my skill. Tan took in Dat's tuxedo jacket a bit, so it would hang nicely, and helped me paint my face with Native American designs, and when Vang announced me, standing at the center of our single ring and extolling my legendary virtues into a microphone, I strode into the rich yellow glow of the tent, the warmth smelling of sawdust and cowshit (a small herd had been foraging on the spot before we arrived), with my arms overhead, flourishing the belt that held my hatchets and knives, and enjoying the applause. All seven rows of the bleachers were full, the audience consisting of resort workers, fishermen and their families, with a smattering of tourists, mainly backpackers, but also a group of immensely fat Russian women who had been transported from a hotel farther along the beach in cyclos pedaled by diminutive Vietnamese men. They were in a good mood, thanks to a comic skit in which Tan played a farm girl and Tranh a village buffoon hopelessly in love with her, his lust manifested by a telescoping rod that could spring outward to a length of fourteen inches and was belted to his hips beneath a pair of baggy trousers.

Mei, dressed in a red sequined costume that pushed up her breasts and squeezed the tops of her chubby thighs like sausage ends, assumed a spread-eagled position in front of the board, and the crowd fell silent. Sitting in a wooden chair at ring center, Vang switched on the music, the theme from a venerable James Bond film. I displayed a knife to the bleachers, took my mark, and sent the blade hurtling toward Mei, planting it solidly in the wood an inch above her head. The first four or five throws were perfect, outlining Mei's head and shoulders. The crowd oohed and ahhed each time the blade sank into the board. Supremely confident now, I flung the knives as I whirled and ducked, pretending to dodge the gunshots embedded in the theme music, throwing from a crouch, on my stomach, leaping—but then I made the slightest of missteps, and the knife I hurled flashed so close to Mei, it nicked the fleshy portion of her upper arm. She shrieked and staggered away from the board, holding the injury. She remained stock-still for an instant, fixing me with a look of anguish, then bolted for the entrance. The crowd was stunned. Vang jumped up, the microphone dangling from his hand. For a second or two, I was rooted to the spot, not certain what to do. The bombastic music isolated me as surely as if it were a fence, and when Tranh shut it off, the fence collapsed, and I felt the pressure of a thousand eyes upon me. Unable to withstand it, I followed Mei out into the night.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The main tent had been erected atop a dune overlooking a bay and a stretch of sandy beach. It was a warm, windy night, and as I emerged from the tent the tall grasses cresting the dune were blown flat by a gust. From behind me, Vang's amplified voice sounded above the rush of the wind and the heavier beat of the surf, urging the audience to stay seated, the show would continue momentarily. The moon was almost full, but it hung behind the clouds, edging an alp of cumulus with silver, and I couldn't find Mei at first. Then the moon sailed clear, paving a glittering avenue across the black water, touching the plumes of combers with phosphorous, brightening the sand, and I spotted Mei—recognizable by her red costume—and two other figures on the beach some thirty feet below; they appeared to be ministering to her.

I started down the face of the dune, slipped in the loose sand and fell. As I scrambled to my feet, I saw Tan struggling up the slope toward me. She caught at the lapels of my tuxedo for balance, nearly causing me to fall again, and we swayed together, holding each other upright. She wore a nylon jacket over her costume, which was like Mei's in every respect but one—it was a shade of peacock blue spangled with silver stars. Her shining hair was gathered at the nape of her neck, crystal earrings sparkled in the lobes of her ears, her dark eyes brimmed with light. She looked made of light, an illusion that would fade once the clouds regrouped about the moon. But the thing that most affected me was not her beauty. Moment to moment, that was something of which I was always aware, how she flowed between states of beauty, shifting from schoolgirl to seductress to serious young woman, and now this starry incarnation materialized before me, the devi of a world that existed only for this precise second. . . . No, it was her calmness that affected me most. It poured over me, coursing around and through me, and even before she spoke, not mentioning what had happened to Mei, as if it were not a potentially fatal accident, a confidence-destroyer that would cause me to falter whenever I picked up a knife—even before that I was convinced by her unruffled manner that everything was as usual, there had been a slight disruption of routine, and now we should go back into the tent because Vang was running out of jokes to tell.

"Mei . . ." I said as we clambered over the crest of the dune, and Tan said, "It's not even a scratch." She took my arm and guided me toward the entrance, walking briskly yet unhurriedly.

I felt I'd been hypnotized—not by a sonorous voice or the pendulum swing of a shiny object, but by a heightened awareness of the ordinary, the steady pulse of time, all the background rhythms of the universe. I was filled with an immaculate calm, distant from the crowd and the booming music. It seemed that I wasn't throwing the knives so much as I was fitting them into slots and letting the turning of the earth whisk them away to thud and quiver in the board, creating a figure of steel slightly larger than the figure of soft brown flesh and peacock blue silk it contained. Dat had never received such applause—I think the crowd believed Mei's injury had been a trick designed to heighten suspense, and they showed their enthusiasm by standing as Tan and I took our bows and walked together through the entranceway. Once outside, she pressed herself against me, kissed my cheek, and said she would see me later. Then she went off toward the rear of the tent to change for the finale.

Under normal circumstances, I would have gone to help with the major, but on this occasion, feeling disconnected and now, bereft of Tan's soothing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

influence, upset at having injured Mei, I wandered along the top of the dune until I came to a gully choked with grasses that afforded protection from the wind, which was still gusting hard, filling the air with grit. I sat down amidst the grass and looked off along the curve of the beach. About fifteen meters to the north, the sand gave out into a narrow shingle and the land planed upward into low hills thick with vegetation. Half-hidden by the foliage was a row of small houses with sloping tiled roofs and open porches; they stood close to the sea, and chutes of yellow light spilled from their windows to illuminate the wavelets beneath. The moon was high, no longer silvery, resembling instead a piece of bloated bone china mottled with dark splotches, and, appearing to lie directly beneath it among a hammock of coconut palms was a pink stucco castle that guarded the point of the bay: the hotel where the tourists who had attended our performance were staying. I could make out antlike shapes scurrying back and forth on the brightly lit crescent of sand in front of it, and I heard a faint music shredded by the wind. The water beyond the break was black as opium.

My thoughts turned not to the accident with Mei, but to how I had performed with Tan. The act had passed quickly, a flurry of knives and light, yet now I recalled details: the coolness of the metal between my fingers; Vang watching anxiously off to the side; a fiery glint on a hatchet blade tumbling toward a spot between Tan's legs. My most significant memory, however, was of her eyes. How they had seemed to beam instructions, orchestrating my movements, so forceful that I'd imagined she was capable of deflecting a blade if my aim proved errant. Given my emotional investment in her, my absolute faith—though we'd never discussed it—in our future together, it was easy to believe she had that kind of power over me. Easy to believe, and somewhat troublesome, for it struck me that we were not equals, we couldn't be as long as she controlled every facet of the relationship. And having concluded this, as if the conclusion were the end of all possible logics concerning the subject, my mind slowed and became mired in despondency.

I'm not certain how long I had been sitting when Tan came walking down the beach, brushing windblown hair from her eyes. She had on a man's short-sleeved shirt and a pair of loose-fitting shorts, and was carrying a blanket. I was hidden from her by the grass, and I was at such a remove from things, not comfortable with but accepting of my solitude, I was half-inclined to let her pass; but then she stopped and called my name, and I, by reflex, responded. She spotted me and picked up her pace. When she reached my side she said without a hint of reproval, merely as if stating a fact, "You went so far. I wasn't sure I'd find you." She spread the blanket on the sand and encouraged me to join her on it. I felt guilty at having had clinical thoughts about her and our relationship—to put this sort of practical construction on what I tended to view as a magical union, a thing of fate and dharma, seemed unworthy, and as a consequence I was at a loss for words. The wind began to blow in a long unbroken stream off the water, and she shivered. I asked if she would like to put on my tuxedo jacket. She said, "No." The line of her mouth tightened, and with a sudden movement, she looked away from me, half-turning her upper body. I thought I must have done something to annoy her, and this so unnerved me, I didn't immediately notice that she was unbuttoning her shirt. She shrugged out of it, held it balled against her chest for a moment, then set it aside; she glanced at me over her shoulder, engaging my eyes. I could tell her usual calm was return-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing—I could almost see her filling with it—and I realized then that this calmness of hers was not hers alone, it was ours, a byproduct of our trust in one another, and what had happened in the main tent had not been a case of her controlling me, saving me from panic, but had been the two of us channeling each other's strength, converting nervousness and fear to certainty and precision. Just as we were doing now.

I kissed her mouth, her small breasts, exulting in their salty aftertaste of brine and dried sweat. Then I drew her down onto the blanket, and what followed, despite clumsiness and flashes of insecurity, was somehow both fierce and chaste, the natural culmination of two years of longing, of unspoken treaties and accommodations. Afterward, pressed together, wrapped in the silk and warmth of spent splendor, whispering the old yet never less than astonishing secrets and promises, saying things that had long gone unsaid, I remember thinking that I would do anything for her. This was not an abstract thought, not simply the atavistic reaction of a man new to a feeling of mastery, though I can't deny that was in me—the sexual and the violent break from the same spring—but was an understanding founded on a considered appreciation of the trials I might have to overcome and the blood I might have to shed in order to keep her safe in a world where wife-murder was a crime for profit and patricide an act of self-defense. It's strange to recall with what a profound sense of reverence I accepted the idea that I was now willing to engage in every sort of human behavior, ranging from the self-sacrificial to the self-gratifying to the perpetration of acts so abhorrent that, once committed, they would harrow me until the end of my days.

At dawn the clouds closed in, the wind died, and the sea lay flat. Now and again a weak sun penetrated the overcast, causing the water to glisten like an expanse of freshly applied gray paint. We climbed to the top of the dune and sat with our arms around each other, not wanting to return to the circus, to break the elastic of the long moment stretching backward into night. The unstirring grass, the energyless water and dead sky, made it appear that time itself had been becalmed. The beach in front of the pink hotel was littered with debris, deserted. You might have thought that our lovemaking had succeeded in emptying the world. But soon we caught sight of Tranh and Mei walking toward us across the dune, Kim and Kai skipping along behind. All were dressed in shorts and shirts, and Tranh carried a net shopping bag that—I saw as he lurched up, stumbling in the sand—contained mineral water and sandwiches.

"What have you kids been up to?" he asked, displaying an exaggerated degree of concern.

Mei punched him on the arm, and, after glancing back and forth between us, as if he suddenly understood the situation, Tranh put on a shocked face and covered his mouth with a hand. Giggling, Kai and Kim went scampering down onto the beach. Mei tugged at Tranh's shirt, but he ignored her and sank onto his knees beside me. "I bet you're hungry," he said, and his round face was split by a gaptoothed grin. He thrust a sandwich wrapped in a paper napkin at me. "Better eat! You're probably going to need your strength."

With an apologetic look in Tan's direction, Mei kneeled beside him; she unwrapped sandwiches and opened two bottles of water. She caught my eye, frowned, pointed to her arm, and shook her forefinger as she might have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

done with a mischievous child. "Next time don't dance around so much," she said, and pretended to sprinkle something on one of the sandwiches. "Or else one night I'll put special herbs in your dinner." Tranh kept peering at Tan, then at me, grinning, nodding, and finally, with a laugh, Tan pushed him onto his back. Down by the water Kai and Kim were tossing pebbles into the sea with girlish ineptitude. Mei called to them and they came running, their braids bouncing; they threw themselves bellyfirst onto the sand, squirmed up to sitting positions, and began gobbling sandwiches.

"Don't eat so fast!" Mei cautioned. "You'll get sick."

Kim, the younger of the sisters, squinched her face at Mei and shoved half the sandwich into her mouth. Tranh contorted his features so his lips nearly touched his nose, and Kim laughed so hard she sprayed bits of bread and fried fish. Tan told her that this was not ladylike. Both girls sat up straight, nibbled their sandwiches—they took it to heart whenever Tan spoke to them about being ladies.

"Didn't you bring anything beside fish?" I asked, inspecting the filling of my sandwich.

"I guess we should have brought oysters," said Tranh. "Maybe some rhinoceros horn, some . . ."

"That stuff's for old guys like you," I told him. "Me, I just need peanut butter."

After we had done eating, Tranh lay back with his head in Mei's lap and told a story about a talking lizard that had convinced a farmer it was the Buddha. Kim and Kai cuddled together, sleepy from their feast. Tan leaned into the notch of my shoulder, and I put my arm around her. It came to me then, not suddenly, but gradually, as if I were being immersed in the knowledge like a man lowering his body into a warm bath, that for the first time in my life—all the life I could remember—I was at home. These people were my family, and the sense of dislocation that had burdened me all those years had evaporated. I closed my eyes and buried my face in Tan's hair, trying to hold onto the feeling, to seal it inside my head so I would never forget it.

Two men in T-shirts and bathing suits came walking along the water's edge in our direction. When they reached the dune they climbed up to where we were sitting. Both were not much older than I, and judging by their fleshiness and soft features, I presumed them to be Americans, a judgment confirmed when the taller of the two, a fellow with a heavy jaw and hundreds of white beads threaded on the strings of his long black hair, lending him a savage appearance, said, "You guys are with that tent show, right?"

Mei, who did not care for Americans, stared meanly at him, but Tranh, who habitually viewed them as potential sources of income, told him that we were, indeed, performers with the circus. Kai and Kim whispered and giggled, and Tranh asked the American what his friend—skinnier, beadless, dull-eyed and open-mouthed, with a complicated headset covering his scalp—was studying.

"Parasailing. We're going parasailing . . . if there's ever any wind and the program doesn't screw up. I woulda left him at the house, but the program's fucked. Didn't want his ass convulsing." He extracted a sectioned strip of plastic from his shirt pocket; each square of plastic held a gelatin capsule shaped like a cut gem and filled with blue fluid. "Wanna brighten your day?" He dangled the strip as if tempting us with a treat. When no one accepted his offer, he shrugged, returned the strip to his pocket; he glanced down at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me. "Hey, that shit with the knives . . . that was part of the fucking plan! Especially when you went benihana on Little Plum Blossom." He jerked his thumb at Mei and then stood nodding, gazing at the sea, as if receiving a transmission from that quarter. "Okay," he said. "Okay. It could be the drugs, but the trusty inner voice is telling me my foreign ways seem ludicrous . . . perhaps even offensive. It well may be that I am somewhat ludicrous. And I'm pretty torched, so I have to assume I've been offensive."

Tranh made to deny this, Mei grunted, Kim and Kai looked puzzled, and Tan asked the American if he was on vacation.

"Thank you," he said to Tan. "Beautiful lady. I am always grateful for the gift of courtesy. No, my friend and I—and two others—are playing at the hotel. We're musicians." He took out his wallet, which had been hinged over the waist of his trunks, and removed from it a thin gold square the size of a postage stamp; he handed it to Tan. "Have you seen these? They're new . . . souvenir things, like. They just play once, but it'll give you a taste. Press your finger on it until it you hear the sound. Then don't touch it again—they get extremely hot."

Tan started to do as he instructed but he said, "No, wait till we're gone. I want to imagine you enjoyed hearing it. If you do, come on down to the hotel after you're finished tonight. You'll be my guests."

"Is it one of your songs?" I asked, curious about him now that he had turned out to be more complicated than he first appeared.

He said, yes, it was an original composition.

"What's it called?" Tranh asked.

"We haven't named it yet," said the American; then, after a pause: "What's the name of your circus?"

Almost as one we said, "Radiant Green Star."

"Perfect," said the American.

Once the two men were out of earshot, Tan pressed her fingertip to the gold square, and soon a throbbing music issued forth, simply structured yet intricately layered by synthesizers, horns, guitars, densely figured by theme and subtle counter-theme, both insinuating and urgent. Kai and Kim stood and danced with one another. Tranh bobbed his head, tapped his foot, and even Mei was charmed, swaying, her eyes closed. Tan kissed me, and we watched a thin white smoke trickle upward from the square, which itself began to shrink, and I thought how amazing it was that things were often not what they seemed, and what a strange confluence of possibilities it had taken to bring all the troupe together—and the six of us *were* the entire troupe, for Vang was never really part of us even when he was there, and though the major was rarely with us, he was always there, a shadow in the corners of our minds. . . . How magical and ineluctable a thing it was for us all to be together at the precise place and time when a man—a rather unprepossessing man at that—walked up from a deserted beach and presented us with a golden square imprinted with a song that he named for our circus, a song that so accurately evoked the mixture of the commonplace and the exotic that characterized life in Radiant Green Star, music that was like smoke, rising up for a few perfect moments, and then vanishing with the wind.

Had Vang asked me at any point during the months that followed to tell him about love, I might have spoken for hours, answering him not with definitions, principles, or homilies, but specific instances, moments, and anec-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dotes. I was happy. Despite the gloomy nature of my soul, I could think of no word that better described how I felt. Though I continued to study my father, to follow his comings and goings, his business maneuvers and social interactions, I now believed that I would never seek to confront him, never try to claim my inheritance. I had all I needed to live, and I only wanted to keep those I loved safe and free from worry.

Tan and I did not bother to hide our relationship, and I expected Vang to rail at me for my transgression. I half-expected him to drive me away from the circus—indeed, I prepared for that eventuality. But he never said a word. I did notice a certain cooling of the atmosphere. He snapped at me more often and on occasion refused to speak; yet that was the extent of his anger. I didn't know how to take this. Either, I thought, he had overstated his concern for Tan or else he had simply accepted the inevitable. That explanation didn't satisfy me, however. I suspected that he might have something more important on his mind, something so weighty that my involvement with his niece seemed a triviality by comparison. And one day, some seven months after Tan and I became lovers, my suspicions were proved correct.

I went to the trailer at mid-afternoon, thinking Vang would be in town. We were camped at the edge of a hardwood forest on a cleared acre of red dirt near Buon Ma Thuot in the Central Highlands, not far from the Cambodian border. Vang usually spent the day before a performance putting up posters, and I had intended to work on the computer; but when I entered, I saw him standing by his desk, folding a shirt, a suitcase open on the chair beside him. I asked what he was doing and he handed me a thick envelope; inside were the licenses and deeds of ownership relating to the circus and its property. "I've signed everything over," he said. "If you have any problems, contact my lawyer."

"I don't understand," I said, dumfounded. "You're leaving?"

He bent to the suitcase and laid the folded shirt inside it. "You can move into the trailer tonight. You and Tan. She'll be able to put it in order. I suppose you've noticed that she's almost morbidly neat." He straightened, pressed his hand against his lower back as if stricken by a pain. "The accounts, the bookings for next year . . . it's all in the computer. Everything else . . ." He gestured at the cabinets on the walls. "You remember where things are."

I couldn't get a grasp on the situation, overwhelmed by the thought that I was now responsible for Green Star, by the fact that the man who for years had been the only consistent presence in my life was about to walk out the door forever. "Why are you leaving?"

He turned to me, frowning. "If you must know, I'm ill."

"But why would you want to leave? We'll just . . ."

"I'm not going to recover," he said flatly.

I peered at him, trying to detect the signs of his mortality, but he looked no thinner, no grayer, than he had for some time. I felt the stirrings of a reaction that I knew he would not want to see, and I tamped down my emotions. "We can care for you here," I said.

He began to fold another shirt. "I plan to join my sister and her husband in what they insist upon calling—" he clicked his tongue against his teeth "—Heaven."

I recalled the talks I'd had with Tan in which she had decried the process of uploading the intelligence, the personality. If the old man was dying,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there was no real risk involved. Still, the concept of such a mechanical transmogrification did not sit well with me.

"Have you nothing to say on the subject?" he asked. "Tan was quite voluble."

"You've told her, then?"

"Of course." He inspected the tail of the shirt he'd been folding, and finding a hole, cast it aside. "We've said our goodbyes."

He continued to putter about, and as I watched him shuffling among the stacks of magazines and newspapers, kicking file boxes and books aside, dust rising wherever he set his hand, a tightness in my chest began to loosen, to work its way up into my throat. I went to the door and stood looking out, seeing nothing, letting the strong sunlight harden the glaze of my feelings. When I turned back, he was standing close to me, suitcase in hand. He held out a folded piece of paper and said, "This is the code by which you can contact me once I've been . . ." He laughed dryly. "Processed, I imagine, would be the appropriate verb. At any rate, I hope you will let me know what you decide concerning your father."

It was in my mind to tell him that I had no intention of contending with my father, but I thought that this would disappoint him, and I merely said that I would do as he asked. We stood facing one another, the air thick with unspoken feelings, with vibrations that communicated an entire history comprised of such mute, awkward moments. "If I'm to have a last walk in the sun," he said at length, "you'll have to let me pass."

That at the end of his days he viewed me only as a minor impediment—it angered me. But I reminded myself that this was all the sentiment of which he was capable. Without asking permission, I embraced him. He patted me lightly on the back and said, "I know you'll take care of things." And with that, he pushed past me and walked off in the direction of the town, vanishing behind one of the parked trucks.

I went into the rear of the trailer, into the partitioned cubicle where Vang slept, and sat down on his bunk. His pillowcase bore a silk-screened image of a beautiful Vietnamese woman and the words HONEY LADY KEEP YOU COMFORT EVERY NIGHT. In the cabinet beside his bed were a broken clock, a small plaster bust of Ho Chi Minh, a few books, several pieces of hard candy, and a plastic key chain in the shape of a butterfly. The meagerness of the life these items described caught at my emotions, and I thought I might weep, but it was as if by assuming Vang's position as the owner of Green Star, I had undergone a corresponding reduction in my natural responses, and I remained dry-eyed. I felt strangely aloof from myself, connected to the life of my mind and body by a tube along which impressions of the world around me were now and then transmitted. Looking back on my years with Vang, I could make no sense of them. He had nurtured and educated me, yet the sum of all that effort—not given cohesion by the glue of affection—came to scraps of memory no more illustrative of a comprehensible whole than were the memories of my mother. They had substance, yet no flavor . . . none, that is, except for a dusty gray aftertaste that I associated with disappointment and loss.

I didn't feel like talking to anyone, and for want of anything else to do, I went to the desk and started inspecting the accounts, working through dusk and into the night. When I had satisfied myself that all was in order, I turned to the bookings. Nothing out of the ordinary. The usual villages, the occasional festival. But when I accessed the bookings for the month of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

March, I saw that during the week of the 17th through the 23rd—the latter date just ten days from my birthday—we were scheduled to perform in Binh Khoi.

I thought this must be a mistake—Vang had probably been thinking of Binh Khoi and my father while recording a new booking and had inadvertently put down the wrong name. But when I called up the contract, I found that no mistake had been made. We were to be paid a great deal of money, sufficient to guarantee a profitable year, but I doubted that Vang's actions had been motivated by our financial needs. He must, I thought, have seen the way things were going with Tan and me, and he must have realized that I would never risk her in order to avenge a crime committed nearly two decades before—thus he had decided to force a confrontation between me and my father. I was furious, and my first impulse was to break the contract; but after I had calmed down I realized that doing so would put us all at risk—the citizens of Binh Khoi were not known for their generosity or flexibility, and if I were to renege on Vang's agreement they would surely pursue the matter in the courts. I would have no chance of winning a judgment. The only thing to do was to play the festival and steel myself to ignore the presence of my father. Perhaps he would be elsewhere, or, even if he was in residence, perhaps he would not attend our little show. Whatever the circumstances, I swore I would not be caught in this trap, and when my eighteenth birthday arrived I would go to the nearest Sony office and take great pleasure in telling Vang—whatever was left of him—that his scheme had failed.

I was still sitting there, trying to comprehend whether or not by contracting the engagement, Vang hoped to provide me with a basis for an informed decision, or if his interests were purely self-serving, when Tan stepped into the trailer. She had on a sleeveless plaid smock, the garment she wore whenever she was cleaning, and it was evident that she'd been crying—the skin beneath her eyes was puffy and red. But she had regained her composure, and she listened patiently, perched on the edge of the desk, while I told her all I'd been thinking about Vang and what he had done to us.

"Maybe it's for the best," she said after I had run down. "This way you'll be sure you've done what you had to do."

I was startled by her reaction. "Are you saying that you think I should kill my father . . . that I should even entertain the possibility?"

She shrugged. "That's for you to decide."

"I've decided already," I said.

"Then there's not a problem."

The studied neutrality of her attitude puzzled me. "You don't think I'll stand by my decision, do you?"

She put a hand to her brow, hiding her face—a gesture that reminded me of Vang. "I don't think you have decided, and I don't think you should . . . not until you see your father." She pinched a fold of skin above the bridge of her nose, then looked up at me. "Let's not talk about this now."

We sat silently for half a minute or thereabouts, each following the path of our own thoughts; then she wrinkled up her nose and said, "It smells bad in here. Do you want to get some air?"

We climbed onto the roof of the trailer and sat gazing at the shadowy line of the forest to the west, the main tent bulking up above it, and a sky so thick with stars that the familiar constellations were assimilated into new and busier cosmic designs: a Buddha face with a diamond on its brow, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tiger's head, a palm tree—constructions of sparkling pinlights against a midnight blue canvas stretched from horizon to horizon. The wind brought the scent of sweet rot and the less pervasive odor of someone's cooking. Somebody switched on a radio in the main tent; a Chinese orchestra whined and jangled. I felt I was sixteen again, that Tan and I had just met, and I thought perhaps we had chosen to occupy this place where we spent so many hours before we were lovers, because here we could banish the daunting pressures of the present, the threat of the future, and be children again. But although those days were scarcely two years removed, we had forever shattered the comforting illusions and frustrating limitations of childhood. I lay back on the aluminum roof, which still held a faint warmth of the day, and Tan hitched up her smock about her waist and mounted me, bracing her hands on my chest as I slipped inside her. Framed by the crowded stars, features made mysterious by the cowl of her hair, she seemed as distant and unreal as the imagined creatures of my zodiac; but this illusion, too, was shattered as she began to rock her hips with an accomplished passion and lifted her face to the sky, transfigured by a look of exalted, almost agonized yearning, like one of those Renaissance angels marooned on a scrap of painted cloud who has just witnessed something amazing pass overhead, a miracle of glowing promise too perfect to hold in the mind. She shook her head wildly when she came, her hair flying all to one side so that it resembled in shape the pennant flying on the main tent, a dark signal of release, and then collapsed against my chest. I held onto her hips, continuing to thrust until the knot of heat in my groin shuddered out of me, leaving a residue of black peace into which the last shreds of my thought were subsumed.

The sweat dried on our skin, and still we lay there, both—I believed—aware that once we went down from the roof, the world would close around us, restore us to its troubled spin. Someone changed stations on the radio, bringing in a Cambodian program—a cooler, wispier music played. A cough sounded close by the trailer, and I raised myself to an elbow, wanting to see who it was. The major was making his way with painful slowness across the cleared ground, leaning on his staff. In the starlight his grotesque shape was lent a certain anonymity—he might have been a figure in a fantasy game, an old down-at-heels magician shrouded in a heavy, ragged cloak, or a beggar on a quest. He shuffled a few steps more, and then, shaking with effort, sank to his knees. For several seconds he remained motionless, then he scooped a handful of the red dirt and held it up to his face. And I recalled that Buon Ma Thuot was near the location of his fictive—or if not fictive, ill-remembered—firebase. Firebase Ruby. Built upon the red dirt of a defoliated plantation.

Tan sat up beside me and whispered, "What's he doing?"

I put a finger to my lips, urging her to silence; I was convinced that the major would not expose himself to the terror of the open sky unless moved by some equally terrifying inner force, and I hoped he might do something that would illuminate the underpinnings of his mystery.

He let the dirt sift through his fingers and struggled to stand. Failed and sagged onto his haunches. His head fell back, and he held a spread-fingered hand up to it as if trying to shield himself from the starlight. His quavery voice ran out of him like a shredded battle flag. "Turn back!" he said. "Oh, God! God! Turn back!"

During the next four months, I had little opportunity to brood over the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prospect of meeting my father. Dealing with the minutiae of Green Star's daily operation took most of my energy and hours, and whenever I had a few minutes respite, Tan was there to fill them. So it was that by the time we arrived in Binh Khoi, I had made scarcely any progress in adjusting to the possibility that I might soon come face-to-face with the man who had killed my mother.

In one aspect, Binh Khoi was the perfect venue for us, since the town affected the same conceit as the circus, being designed to resemble a fragment of another time. It was situated near the Pass of the Ocean Clouds in the Truong Son Mountains some forty kilometers north of Danang, and many of the homes there were afforded a view of green hills declining toward the Coastal Plain. On the morning we arrived those same hills were half-submerged in thick white fog, the plain was totally obscured, and a pale mist had infiltrated the narrow streets, casting an air of ominous enchantment over the place. The oldest of the houses had been built no more than fifty years before, yet they were all similar to nineteenth century houses that still existed in certain sections of Hanoi: two and three stories tall and fashioned of stone, painted dull yellow and gray and various other sober hues, with sharply sloping roofs of dark green tile and compounds hidden by high walls and shaded by bougainvillea, papaya, and banana trees. Except for street lights in the main square and pedestrians in bright eccentric clothing, we might have been driving through a hill station during the 1800s; but I knew that hidden behind this antiquated façade were state-of-the-art security systems that could have vaporized us had we not been cleared to enter.

The most unusual thing about Binh Khoi was its silence. I'd never been in a place where people lived in any considerable quantity that was so hushed, devoid of the stew of sounds natural to a human environment. No hens squabbling or dogs yipping, no whining motor scooters or humming cars, no children at play. In only one area was there anything approximating normal activity and noise: the marketplace, which occupied an unpaved street leading off the square. Here men and women in coolie hats hunkered beside baskets of jackfruit, chilies, garlic, custard apples, durians, geckos, and dried fish; meat and caged puppies and monkeys and innumerable other foodstuffs were sold in canvas-roofed stalls; and the shoppers, mostly male couples, haggled with the vendors, occasionally venting their dismay at the prices . . . this despite the fact that any one of them could have bought everything in the market without blinking. Though the troupe shared their immersion in a contrived past, I found the depth of their pretense alarming and somewhat perverse. As I maneuvered the truck cautiously through the press, they peered incuriously at me through the windows—faces rendered exotic and nearly unreadable by tattoos and implants and caps of silver wire and winking light that appeared to be woven into their hair—and I thought I could feel their amusement at the shabby counterfeit we offered of their more elegantly realized illusion. I believe I might have hated them for the fashionable play they made of arguing over minuscule sums with the poor vendors, for the triviality of spirit this mockery implied, if I had not already hated them so completely for being my father's friends and colleagues.

At the end of the street, beyond the last building, lay a grassy field bordered by a low whitewashed wall. Strings of light bulbs linked the banana trees and palms that grew close to the wall on three sides, and I noticed several paths leading off into the jungle that were lit in the same fashion. On

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the fourth side, beyond the wall, the land dropped off into a notch, now choked with fog, and on the far side of the notch, perhaps fifty yards away, a massive hill with a sheer rock face and the ruins of an old temple atop it lifted from the fog, looming above the field—it was such a dramatic sight and so completely free of mist, every palm frond articulated, every vine-enlaced crevice and knob of dark, discolored stone showing clear, that I wondered if it might be a clever projection, another element of Binh Khoi's decor.

We spent the morning and early afternoon setting up, and once I was satisfied that everything was in readiness, I sought out Tan, thinking we might go for a walk; but she was engaged in altering Kai's costume. I wandered into the main tent and busied myself by making sure the sawdust had been spread evenly. Kai was swinging high above on a rope suspended from the metal ring at the top of the tent, and one of our miniature tigers had climbed a second rope and was clinging to it by its furry hands, batting at her playfully whenever she swooped near. Tranh and Mei were playing cards in the bleachers, and Kim was walking hand-in-hand with our talking monkey, chattering away as if the creature could understand her—now and then it would turn its white face to her and squeak in response, saying "I love you" and "I'm hungry" and other equally non-responsive phrases. I stood by the entranceway, feeling rather paternal toward my little family gathered under the lights, and I was just considering whether or not I should return to the trailer and see if Tan had finished, when a baritone voice sounded behind me, saying, "Where can I find Vang Ky?"

My father was standing with hands in pockets a few feet away, wearing black trousers and a gray shirt of some shiny material. He looked softer and heavier than he did in his photographs, and the flying fish tattoo on his cheek was now surrounded by more than half-a-dozen tiny emblems denoting his business connections. With his immense head, his shaved skull gleaming in the hot lights, he himself seemed the emblem of some monumental and soul-less concern. At his shoulder, over a foot shorter than he, was a striking Vietnamese woman with long straight hair, dressed in tight black slacks and a matching tunic: Phuong Ahn Nguyen. She was staring at me intently.

Stunned, I managed to get out that Vang was no longer with the circus, and my father said, "How can that be? He's the owner, isn't he?"

Shock was giving way to anger, anger so fulminant I could barely contain it. My hands trembled. If I'd had one of my knives to hand, I would have plunged it without a thought into his chest. I did the best I could to conceal my mood and told him what had become of Vang; but it seemed that as I catalogued each new detail of his face and body—a frown line, a reddened ear lobe, a crease in his fleshy neck—a vial of some furious chemical was tipped over and added to the mix of my blood.

"Goddamn it!" he said, casting his eyes up to the canvas; he appeared distraught. "Shit!" He glanced down at me. "Have you got his access code? It's never the same once they go to Heaven. I'm not sure they really know what's going on. But I guess it's my only option."

"I doubt he'd approve of my giving the code to a stranger," I told him.

"We're not strangers," he said. "Vang was my father-in-law. We had a falling-out after my wife died. I hoped having the circus here for a week, I'd be able to persuade him to sit down and talk. There's no reason for us to be at odds."

I suppose the most astonishing thing he said was that Vang was his fa-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ther-in-law, and thus my grandfather. I didn't know what to make of that; I could think of no reason he might have for lying, yet it raised a number of troubling questions. But his last statement, his implicit denial of responsibility for my mother's death . . . it had come so easily to his lips! Hatred flowered in me like a cold star, acting to calm me, allowing me to exert a measure of control over my anger.

Phoung stepped forward and put a hand on my chest; my heart pounded against the pressure of her palm. "Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"I'm . . . surprised," I said. "That's all. I didn't realize Vang had a son-in-law."

Her make-up was severe, her lips painted a dark mauve, her eyes shaded by the same color, but in the fineness of her features and the long oval shape of her face, she bore a slight resemblance to Tan.

"Why are you angry?" she asked.

My father eased her aside. "It's all right. I came on pretty strong—he's got every right to be angry. Why don't the two of us . . . what's your name, kid?"

"Dat," I said, though I was tempted to tell him the truth.

"Dat and I will have a talk," he said to Phuong. "I'll meet you back at the house."

We went outside, and Phuong, displaying more than a little reluctance, headed off in the general direction of the trailer. It was going on dusk and the fog was closing in. The many-colored bulbs strung in the trees close to the wall and lining the paths had been turned on; each bulb was englobed by a fuzzy halo, and altogether they imbued the encroaching jungle with an eerily festive air, as if the spirits lost in the dark green tangles were planning a party. We stood beside the wall, beneath the great hill rising from the shifting fogbank, and my father tried to convince me to hand over the code. When I refused he offered money, and when I refused his money he glared at me and said, "Maybe you don't get it. I really need the code. What's it going to take for you to give it to me?"

"Perhaps it's you who doesn't get it," I said. "If Vang wanted you to have the code he would have given it to you. But he gave it to *me,* and to no one else. I consider that a trust, and I won't break it unless he signifies that I should."

He looked off into the jungle, ran a hand across his scalp, and made a frustrated noise. I doubted he was experienced at rejection, and though it didn't satisfy my anger, it pleased me to have rejected him. Finally he laughed. "Either you're a hell of a businessman or an honorable man. Or maybe you're both. That's a scary notion." He shook his head in what I took for amiable acceptance. "Why not call Vang? Ask him if he'd mind having a talk with me."

I didn't understand how this was possible.

"What sort of computer do you own?" he asked.

I told him and he said, "That won't do it. Tell you what. Come over to my house tonight after your show. You can use my computer to contact him. I'll pay for your time."

I was suddenly suspicious. He seemed to be offering himself to me, making himself vulnerable, and I did not believe that was in his nature. His desire to contact Vang might be a charade. What if he had discovered my identity and was luring me into a trap?

"I don't know if I can get away," I said. "It may have to be in the morning."

He looked displeased, but said, "Very well." He fingered a business card

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from his pocket, gave it to me. "My address." Then he pressed what appeared to be a crystal button into my hand. "Don't lose it. Carry it with you whenever you come. If you don't, you'll be picked up on the street and taken somewhere quite unpleasant."

As soon as he was out of sight I hurried over to the trailer, intending to sort things out with Tan. She was outside, sitting on a folding chair, framed by a spill of hazy yellow light from the door. Her head was down, and her blouse was torn, the top two buttons missing. I asked what was wrong; she shook her head and would not meet my eyes. But when I persisted she said, "That woman . . . the one who works for your father . . ."

"Phuong? Did she hurt you?"

She kept her head down, but I could see her chin quivering. "I was coming to find you, and I ran into her. She started talking to me. I thought she was just being friendly, but then she tried to kiss me. And when I resisted"—she displayed the tear in her blouse—"she did this." She gathered herself. "She wants me to be with her tonight. If I refuse, she says she'll make trouble for us."

It would have been impossible for me to hate my father more, but this new insult, this threat to Tan, perfected it, added a finishing color, like the last brush stroke applied to a masterpiece. I stood a moment gazing off toward the hill—it seemed I had inside me an analog to that forbidding shape, something equally stony and vast. I led Tan into the trailer, sat her down at the desk, and made her tea; then I repeated all my father had said. "Is it possible," I asked, "that Vang is my grandfather?"

She held the teacup in both hands, blew on the steaming liquid and took a sip. "I don't know. My family has always been secretive. All my parents told me was that Vang was once a wealthy man with a loving family, and that he had lost everything."

"If he is my grandfather," I said, "then we're cousins."

She set down the cup and stared dolefully into it as if she saw in its depths an inescapable resolution. "I don't care. If we were brother and sister, I wouldn't care."

I pulled her up, put my arms around her, and she pressed herself against me. I felt that I was at the center of an enormously complicated knot, too diminutive to be able to see all its loops and twists. If Vang was my grandfather, why had he treated me with such coldness? Perhaps my mother's death had deadened his heart, perhaps that explained it. But knowing that Tan and I were cousins, wouldn't he have told us the truth when he saw how close we were becoming? Or was he so old-fashioned that the idea of an intimate union between cousins didn't bother him? The most reasonable explanation was that my father had lied. I saw that now, saw it with absolute clarity. It was the only possibility that made sense. And if he had lied, it followed that he knew who I was. And if he knew who I was . . .

"I have to kill him," I said. "Tonight . . . it has to be tonight."

I was prepared to justify the decision, to explain why a course of inaction would be a greater risk, to lay out all the potentials of the situation for Tan to analyze, but she pushed me away, just enough so that she could see my face, and said, "You can't do it alone. That woman's a professional assassin." She rested her forehead against mine. "I'll help you."

"That's ridiculous! If I . . ."

"Listen to me, Philip! She can read physical signs, she can tell if someone's angry. If they're anxious. Well, she'll expect me to be angry. And anx-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ious. She'll think it's just resentment . . . nerves. I'll be able to get close to her."

"And kill her? Will you be able to kill her?"

Tan broke from the embrace and went to stand at the doorway, gazing out at the fog. Her hair had come unbound, spilling down over her shoulders and back, the ribbon that had tied it dangling like a bright blue river winding across a ground of black silk.

"I'll ask Mei to give me something. She has herbs that will induce sleep." She glanced back at me. "There are things you can do to insure our safety once your father's dead. We should discuss them now."

I was amazed by her coolness, how easily she had made the transition from being distraught. "I can't ask you to do this," I said.

"You're not asking—I'm volunteering." I detected a note of sad distraction in her voice. "You'd do as much for me."

"Of course, but if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be involved in this."

"If it weren't for you," she said, the sadness even more evident in her tone, "I'd have no involvements at all."

The first part of the show that evening, the entrance of the troupe to march music, Mei leading the way, wearing a red and white majorette's uniform, twirling—and frequently dropping—a baton, the tigers gamboling at her heels; then two comic skits; then Kai and Kim whirling and spinning aloft in their gold and sequined costumes, tumbling through the air happy as birds; then another skit and Tranh's clownish juggling, pretending to be drunk and making improbable catches as he tumbled, rolled, and staggered about . . . all this was received by the predominantly male audience with a degree of ironic detachment. They laughed at Mei, they whispered and smirked during the skits, they stared dispassionately at Kim and Kai, and they jeered Tranh. It was plain that they had come to belittle us, that doing so validated their sense of superiority. I registered their reactions, but was so absorbed in thinking about what was to happen later, they seemed unreal, unimportant, and it took all my discipline to focus on my own act, a performance punctuated by a knife hurled from behind me that struck home between Tan's legs. There was a burst of enthusiastic cheers, and I turned to see Phuong some thirty feet away, taking a bow in the bleachers—it was she who had thrown the knife. She looked at me and shrugged, with that gesture dismissing my poor skills, and lifted her arms to receive the building applause. I searched the area around her for my father, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The audience remained abuzz, pleased that one of their own had achieved this victory, but when the major entered, led in by Mei and Tranh, they fell silent at the sight of his dark, convulsed figure. Leaning on his staff, he hobbled along the edge of the bleachers, looking into this and that face as if hoping to find a familiar one, and then, moving to the center of the ring, he began to tell the story of Firebase Ruby. I was alarmed at first, but his delivery was eloquent, lyrical, not the plainspoken style in which he had originally couched the tale, and the audience was enthralled. When he came to tell of the letter he had written his wife detailing his hatred of all things Vietnamese, a uneasy muttering arose from the bleachers and rapt expressions turned to scowls; but then he was past that point, and as he described the Viet Cong assault, his listeners settled back and seemed once again riveted by his words.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"In the phosphor light of the hanging flares," he said, "I saw the blood-red ground spread out before me. Beyond the head-high hedgerows of coiled steel wire, black-clad men and women coursed from the jungle, myriad and quick as ants, and, inside the wire, emerging from their secret warrens, more sprouted from the earth like the demon yield of some infernal rain. All around me, my men were dying, and even in the midst of fear, I felt myself the object of a great calm observance, as if the tiny necklace-strung images of the Buddha the enemy held in their mouths when they attacked had been empowered to summon their ribbed original, and somewhere up above the flares, an enormous face had been conjured from the dark matter of the sky and was gazing down with serene approval.

"We could not hold the position long—that was clear. But I had no intention of surrendering. Drunk on whiskey and adrenaline, I was consumed by the thought of death, my own and others', and though I was afraid, I acted less out of fear than from the madness of battle and a kind of communion with death, a desire to make death grow and flourish and triumph. I retreated into the communications bunker and ordered the corporal in charge to call for an air strike on the coordinates of Firebase Ruby. When he balked I put a pistol to his head until he had obeyed. Then I emptied a clip into the radio so no one could countermand me."

The major bowed his head and spread his arms, as though preparing for a supreme display of magic; then his resonant voice sounded forth again, like the voice of a beast speaking from a cave, rough from the bones that have torn its throat. His eyes were chunks of phosphorous burning in the bark of a rotting log.

"When the explosions began, I was firing from a sandbagged position atop the communications bunker. The VC pouring from the jungle slowed their advance, milled about, and those inside the wire looked up in terror to see the jets screaming overhead, so low I could make out the stars on their wings. Victory was stitched across the sky in rocket trails. Gouts of flame gouged the red dirt, opening the tunnels to the air. The detonations began to blend one into the other, and the ground shook like a sheet of plywood under the pounding of a hammer. Clouds of marbled fire and smoke boiled across the earth, rising to form a dreadful second sky of orange and black, and I came to my feet, fearful yet delighted, astonished by the enormity of the destruction I had called down. Then I was knocked flat. Sandbags fell across my legs, a body flung from God knows where landed on my back, driving the breath from me, and in the instant before consciousness fled, I caught the rich stink of napalm.

"In the morning I awoke and saw a bloody, jawless face with staring blue eyes pressed close to mine, looking as if it were still trying to convey a last desperate message. I clawed my way from beneath the corpse and staggered upright to find myself the lord of a killed land, of a raw, red scar littered with corpses in the midst of a charcoaled forest. I went down from the bunker and wandered among the dead. From every quarter issued the droning of flies. Everywhere lay arms, legs, and grisly relics I could not identify. I was numb, I had no feeling apart from a pale satisfaction at having survived. But as I wandered among the dead, taking notice of the awful intimacies death had imposed: a dozen child-sized bodies huddled in a crater, anonymous as a nest of scorched beetles; a horribly burned woman with buttocks exposed reaching out a clawed hand to touch the lips of a disembodied head—these and a hundred other such scenes brought home the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

truth that I was their author. It wasn't guilt I felt then. Guilt was irrelevant. We were all guilty, the dead and the living, the good and those who had abandoned God. Guilt is our inevitable portion of the world's great trouble. No, it was the recognition that at the moment when I knew the war was lost—my share of it, at least—I chose not to cut my losses but to align myself with a force so base and negative that we refuse to admit its place in human nature and dress it in mystical clothing and call it Satan or Shiva so as to separate it from ourselves. Perhaps this sort of choice is a soldier's virtue, but I can no longer view it in that light." He tapped his chest with the tip of his staff. "Though I will never say that my enemies were just, there is justice in what I have endured since that day. All men sin, all men do evil. And evil shows itself in our faces." Here he aimed the staff at the audience and tracked it from face to face, as if highlighting the misdeeds imprinted on each. "What you see of me now is not the man I was, but the thing I became at the instant I made my choice. Take from my story what you will, but understand this: I am unique only in that the judgment of my days is inscribed not merely on my face, but upon every inch of my body. We are all of us monsters waiting to be summoned forth by a moment of madness and pride."

As Tranh and I led him from the tent, across the damp grass, the major was excited, almost incoherently so, not by the acclaim he had received, but because he had managed to complete his story. He plucked at my sleeve, babbling, bobbing his head, but I paid him no mind, concerned about Tan, whom I had seen talking to Phuong in the bleachers. And when she came running from the main tent, a windbreaker thrown over her costume, I forgot him entirely.

"We're not going directly back to the house," she said. "She wants to take me to a club on the square. I don't know when we'll get to your father's."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea. I think we should wait until morning."

"It's all right," she said. "Go to the house and as soon as you've dealt with your father, do exactly what I told you. When you hear us enter the house, stay out of sight. Don't do a thing until I come and get you. Understand?"

"I don't know," I said, perplexed at the way she had taken charge.

"Please!" She grabbed me by the lapels. "Promise you'll do as I say! Please!"

I promised, but as I watched her run off into the dark I had a resurgence of my old sense of dislocation, and though I had not truly listened to the major's story, having been occupied with my own troubles, the sound of him sputtering and chortling behind me, gloating over the treasure of his recovered memory, his invention, whatever it was, caused me to wonder then about the nature of my own choice, and the story that I might someday tell.

My father's house was on Yen Phu Street—two stories of pocked gray stone with green vented shutters and a green door with a knocker carved in the shape of a water buffalo's head. I arrived shortly after midnight and stood in the lee of the high whitewashed wall that enclosed his compound. The fog had been cut by a steady drizzle, and no pedestrians were about. Light slanted from the vents of a shuttered upstairs window, and beneath it was parked a bicycle in whose basket rested a dozen white lilies, their stems wrapped in butcher paper. I imagined that my father had ridden the bicycle to market and had forgotten to retrieve the flowers after carrying his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other purchases inside. They seemed omenical in their glossy pallor, a sterile emblem of the bloody work ahead.

The idea of killing my father held no terrors for me—I had performed the act in my mind hundreds of times, I'd conceived its every element—and as I stood there I felt the past accumulating at my back like the cars of a train stretching for eighteen years, building from my mother's death to the shuddering engine of the moment I was soon to inhabit. All the misgivings that earlier had nagged at me melted away, like fog before rain. I was secure in my hatred and in the knowledge that I had no choice, that my father was a menace who would never fade.

I crossed the street, knocked, and after a few seconds he admitted me into a brightly lit alcove with a darkened room opening off to the right. He was dressed in a voluminous robe of green silk, and as he proceeded me up the stairway to the left of the alcove, the sight of his bell-like shape and bald head with the silver plate collaring the base of his skull . . . these things along with the odor of jasmine incense led me to imagine that I was being escorted to an audience with some mysterious religious figure by one of his eunuch priests. At the head of the stair was a narrow white room furnished with two padded chrome chairs, a wall screen, and, at the far end, a desk bearing papers, an ornamental vase, an old-fashioned letter opener, and a foot-high gilt and bronze Buddha. My father sat down in one of the chairs, triggered the wall screen's computer mode with a penlight, and set about accessing the Sony AI, working through various menus, all the while chatting away, saying he was sorry he'd missed our show, he hoped to attend the following night, and how was I enjoying my stay in Binh Khoi, it often seemed an unfriendly place to newcomers, but by week's end I'd feel right at home. I had brought no weapon, assuming that his security would detect it. The letter opener, I thought, would do the job. But my hand fell instead to the Buddha. It would be cleaner, I decided. A single blow. I picked it up, hefted it. I had anticipated that when the moment arrived, I would want to make myself known to my father, to relish his shock and dismay; but I understood that was no longer important, and I only wanted him to die. In any case, since he likely knew the truth about me, the dramatic scene I'd envisioned would be greatly diminished.

"That's Thai. Fifteenth century," he said, nodding at the statue, then returned his attention to the screen. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Very," I said.

Then, without a thought, all thinking necessary having already been done, and the deed itself merely an automatic function, the final surge of an eighteen-year-long momentum, I stepped behind him and swung the statue at the back of his head. I expected to hear a crack but the sound of impact was plush, muffled, such as might be caused by the flat of one's hand striking a pillow. He let out an explosive grunt, toppled with a twisting motion against the wall, ending up on his side, facing outward. There was so much blood, I assumed he must be dead. But then he groaned, his eyes blinked open, and he struggled to his knees. I saw that I'd hit the silver plate at the base of his skull. Blood was flowing out around the plate, but it had protected him from mortal damage. His robe had fallen open, and with his pale mottled belly bulging from the green silk and the blood streaking his neck, his smallish features knitted in pain and perplexity, he looked gross and clownishly pitiable. He held up an unsteady hand to block a second blow. His mouth worked, and he said "Wait . . ." or "What . . . ." Which, I can't be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sure. But I was in no mood either to wait or to explain myself. A clean death might not have affected me so deeply, but that I had made of a whole healthy life this repellent half-dead thing wobbling at my feet—it assaulted my moral foundation, it washed the romantic tint of revenge from the simple, terrible act of slaughter, and when I struck at him again. this time smashing the statue down two-handed onto the top of his skull, I was charged with the kind of fear that afflicts a child when he more or less by accident wounds a bird with a stone and seeks to hide the act from God by tossing his victim onto an ash heap. My father sagged onto his back, blood gushing from his nose and mouth. I caught a whiff of feces and staggered away, dropping the Buddha. Now that my purpose had been accomplished, like a bee dying from having stung its enemy, I felt drained of poison, full of dull surprise that there had been no more rewarding result.

The penlight had rolled beneath the second chair. I picked it up, and, following Tan's instructions, I used the computer to contact a security agency in Danang. A blond woman with a brittle manner appeared on the screen and asked my business. I explained my circumstances, not bothering to characterize the murder as anything other than it was—the size of my trust would guarantee my legal immunity—and also provided her with the number of Vang's lawyer, as well as some particulars concerning the trust, thereby establishing my bona fides. The woman vanished, her image replaced by a shifting pattern of pastel colors, and, after several minutes, this in turn was replaced by a contract form with a glowing blue patch at the bottom to which I pressed the ball of my thumb. The woman reappeared, much more solicitous now, and cautioned me to remain where I was. She assured me that an armed force would be at the house within the hour. As an afterthought she advised me to wipe the blood from my face.

The presence of the body—its meat reality—made me uncomfortable. I picked up the letter opener and went down the stairs and groped my way across the unlit room off the alcove and found a chair in a corner from which I could see the door. Sitting alone in the darkness amplified the torpor that had pervaded me, and though I sensed certain unsettling dissonances surrounding what had just taken place, I was not sufficiently alert to consider them as other than aggravations. I had been sitting there for perhaps ten minutes when the door opened and Phuong, laughing, stepped into the alcove with Tan behind her, wearing a blue skirt and checkered blouse. She kicked the door shut, pushed Tan against the wall, and began to kiss her, running a hand up under her skirt. Then her head snapped around, and although I didn't believe she could see in the dark, she stared directly at me.

Before I could react, before I could be sure that Phuong had detected me, Tan struck her beneath the jaw with the heel of her left hand, driving her against the opposite wall, and followed this with a kick to the stomach. Phuong rolled away and up into a crouch. She cried out my father's name: "William!" Whether in warning or—recognizing what had happened—in grief, I cannot say. Then the two women began to fight. It lasted no more than half a minute, but their speed and eerie grace were incredible to see: like watching two long-fingered witches dancing in a bright patch of weakened gravity and casting violent spells. Dazed by Tan's initial blows, Phoung went on the defensive, but soon she recovered and started to hold her own. I remembered the letter opener in my hand. The thing was poorly balanced and Phuong's quickness made the timing hard to judge, but then she paused, preparing to launch an attack, and I flung the opener, lodging it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

squarely between her shoulderblades. Not a mortal wound—the blade was too dull to bite deep—but a distracting one. She shrieked, tried to reach the opener, and, as she reeled to the side, Tan came up behind her and broke her neck with a savage twist. She let the body fall and walked toward me, a shadow in the darkened room. It seemed impossible that she was the same woman I had known on the beach at Vung Tau, and I felt a spark of fear.

"Are you all right?" she asked, stopping a few feet away.

"All right?" I laughed. "What's going on here?"

She gave no reply, and I said, "Apparently you decided against using Mei's herbs."

"If you had done as I asked, if you'd stayed clear, it might not have been necessary to kill her." She came another step forward. "Have you called for security?"

I nodded. "Did you learn to fight like that in Hue?"

"In China," she said.

"At a private security company. Like Phuong."

"Yes."

"Then it would follow that you're not Vang's niece."

"But I am," she said. "He used the last of his fortune to have me trained so I could protect you. He was a bitter man . . . to have used his family so."

"And I suppose sleeping with me falls under the umbrella of protection."

She kneeled beside the chair, put a hand on my neck, and gazed at me entreatingly. "I love you, Philip. I would do anything for you. How can you doubt it?"

I was moved by her sincerity, but I could not help but treat her coldly. It was as if a valve had been twisted shut to block the flow of my emotions. "That's right," I said. "Vang told me that your kind were conditioned to bond with their clients."

I watched the words hit home, a wounded expression washing across her features, then fading, like a ripple caused by a pebble dropped into a still pond. "Is that so important?" she asked. "Does it alter the fact that you fell in love with me?"

I ignored this, yet I was tempted to tell her, No, it did not. "If you were trained to protect me, why did Vang discourage our relationship?"

She got to her feet, her face unreadable, and went a few paces toward the alcove; she appeared to be staring at Phuong's body, lying crumpled in the light. "There was a time when I think he wanted me for himself. That may explain it."

"Did Phuong really accost you?" I asked. "Or was that . . .

"I've never lied to you. I've deceived you by not revealing everything I knew about Vang," she said. "But I was bound to obey him in that. As you said, I've been conditioned."

I had other questions, but I could not frame one of them. The silence of the house seemed to breed a faint humming, and I became oppressed by the idea that Tan and I were living analogs of the two corpses, that the wealth I was soon to receive as a consequence of our actions would lead us to a pass wherein we would someday lie dead in separate rooms of a silent house, while two creatures like ourselves but younger would stand apart from one another in fretful isolation, pondering their future. I wanted to dispossess myself of this notion, to contrive a more potent reality, and I crossed the room to Tan and turned her to face me. She refused to meet my eyes, but I tipped up her chin and kissed her. A lover's kiss. I touched her breasts—a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

treasuring touch. But despite the sweet affirmation and openness of the kiss, I think it also served a formal purpose, the sealing of a bargain whose terms we did not fully understand.

Six months and a bit after my eighteenth birthday, I was sitting in a room in the Sony offices in Saigon, a windowless space with black walls and carpet and silver-framed photographs of scenes along the Perfume River and in the South China Sea, when Vang flickered into being against the far wall. I thought I must seem to him, as he seemed to me, like a visitation, a figure from another time manifested in a dream. He appeared no different than he had on the day he left the circus—thin and gray-haired, dressed in careworn clothing—and his attitude toward me was, as ever, distant. I told him what had happened in Binh Khoi, and he said, "I presumed you would have more trouble with William. Of course he thought he had leverage over me—he thought he had Tan in his clutches. So he let his guard down. He believed he had nothing to fear."

His logic was overly simplistic, but rather than pursue this, I asked the question foremost on my mind: why had he not told me that he was my grandfather? I had uncovered quite a lot about my past in the process of familiarizing myself with Vang's affairs, but I wanted to hear it all.

"Because I'm *not* your grandfather," he said. "I was William's father-in-law, but . . ." He shot me an amused look. "I should have thought you would have understood all this by now."

I saw no humor in the situation. "Explain it to me."

"As you wish." He paced away from me, stopped to inspect one of the framed photographs. "William engineered the death of my wife, my daughter, and my grandson in a plane crash. Once he had isolated me, he challenged my mental competency, intending to take over my business concerns. To thwart him, I faked my suicide. It was a very convincing fake. I used a body I'd had cloned to supply me with organs. I kept enough money to support Green Star and to pay for Tan's training. The rest you know."

"Not so," I said. "You haven't told me who I am."

"Ah, yes." He turned from the photograph and smiled pleasantly at me. "I suppose that would interest you. Your mother's name was Tuyet. Tuyet Su Vanh. She was an actress in various pornographic media. The woman you saw in your dream—that was she. We had a relationship for several years, then we drifted apart. Not long before I lost my family, she came to me and told me she was dying. One of the mutated HIVs. She said she'd borne a child by me. A son. She begged me to take care of you. I didn't believe her, of course. But she had given me pleasure, so I set up a trust for you. A small one."

"And then you decided to use me."

"William had undermined my authority to the extent that I could not confront him directly. I needed an arrow to aim at his heart. I told your mother that if she cooperated with me I'd adopt you, place my fortune in the trust, and make you my heir. She gave permission to have your memory wiped. I wanted you empty so I could fill you with my purpose. After you were re-educated, she helped construct some fragmentary memories that were implanted by means of a biochip. Nonetheless, you were a difficult child to mold. I couldn't be certain that you would seek William out, and so, since I was old and tired and likely not far from Heaven, I decided to feign an illness and withdraw. This allowed me to arrange a confrontation without risk to myself."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I should have hated Vang, but after six months of running his businesses, of viewing the world from a position of governance and control, I understood him far too well to hate—though at that moment, understanding the dispassionate requisites and protocols of such a position seemed as harsh a form of judgment as the most bitter of hatreds. "What happened to my mother?" I asked.

"I arranged for her to receive terminal care in an Australian hospital."

"And her claim that I was your biological son. . . . did you investigate it?"

"Why should I? It didn't matter. A man in my position could not acknowledge an illegitimate child, and once I had made my decision to abdicate my old life, it mattered even less. If it has any meaning for you, there are medical records you can access."

"I think I'd prefer it to remain a mystery," I told him.

"You've no reason to be angry at me," he said. "I've made you wealthy. And what did it cost? A few memories."

I shifted in my chair, steepled my hands on my stomach. "Are you convinced that my . . . that William had your family killed? He seemed to think there had been a misunderstanding."

"That was a charade! If you're asking whether or not I had proof—of course I didn't. William knew how to disguise his hand."

"So everything you did was based solely on the grounds of your suspicions."

"No! It was based on my knowledge of the man!" His tone softened. "What does it matter? Only William and I knew the truth, and he is dead. If you doubt me, if you pursue this further, you'll never be able to satisfy yourself."

"I suppose you're right," I said, getting to my feet.

"Are you leaving already?" He wore an aggrieved expression. "I was hoping you'd tell me about Tan . . . and Green Star. What has happened with my little circus?"

"Tan is well. As for Green Star, I gave it to Mei and Tranh."

I opened the door, and Vang made a gesture of restraint. "Stay a while longer, Philip. Please. You and Tan are the only people with whom I have an emotional connection. It heartens me to spend time with you."

Hearing him describe our relationship in these terms gave me pause. I recalled the conversation in which Tan had asserted that something central to the idea of life died when one was uploaded into Heaven—Vang's uncharacteristic claim to an emotional debt caused me to think that he might well be, as she'd described her parents, a colored shadow, a cunningly contrived representation of the original. I hoped that this was not the case; I hoped that he was alive in every respect.

"I have to go," I said. "Business, you understand. But I have some news that may be of interest to you."

"Oh?" he said eagerly. "Tell me."

"I've invested heavily in Sony, and through negotiation I've arranged for one of your old companies—Intertech of Hanoi—to be placed in charge of overseeing the virtual environment. I would expect you're soon going to see some changes in your particular part of Heaven."

He seemed nonplussed, then a look of alarm dawned on his face. "What are you going to do?"

"Me? Not a thing." I smiled, and the act of smiling weakened my emotional restraint—a business skill I had not yet perfected—and let anger roughen my voice. "It's much more agreeable to have your dirty work handled by others, don't you think?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

On occasion, Tan and I manage to rekindle an intimacy that reminds us of the days when we first were lovers, but these occasions never last for long, and our relationship is plagued by the lapses into neutrality or—worse—indifference that tend to plague any two people who have spent ten years in each other's company. In our case these lapses are often accompanied by bouts of self-destructive behavior. It seems we're punishing ourselves for having experienced what we consider an undeserved happiness. Even our most honest infidelities are inclined to be of the degrading sort. I understand this. The beach at Vung Tau, once the foundation of our union, has been replaced by a night on Yen Phu Street in Binh Khoi, and no edifice built upon such imperfect stone could be other than cracked and deficient. Nonetheless, we both realize that whatever our portion of contentment in this world, we are fated to seek it together.

From time to time, I receive a communication from Vang. He does not look well, and his tone is always desperate, cajoling. I tell myself that I should relent and restore him to the afterlife for which he contracted; but I am not highly motivated in that regard. If there truly is something that dies when one ascends to Heaven, I fear it has already died in me, and I blame Vang for this.

Seven years after my talk with Vang, Tan and I attended a performance of the circus in the village of Loc Noi. There was a new James Bond Cochise, Kai and Kim had become pretty teenagers, both Tranh and Mei were thinner, but otherwise things were much the same. We sat in the main tent after the show and reminisced. The troupe—Mei in particular—were unnerved by my bodyguards, but all in all, it was a pleasant reunion.

After a while I excused myself and went to see the major. He was huddled in his tent, visible by the weird flickerings in his eyes . . . though as my vision adapted to the dark, I was able make out the cowled shape of his head against the canvas backdrop. Tranh had told me he did not expect the major to live much longer, and now that I was close to him, I found that his infirmity was palpable, I could hear it in his labored breath. I asked if he knew who I was, and he replied without inflection, as he had so many years before, "Philip." I'd hoped that he would be more forthcoming, because I still felt akin to him, related through the cryptic character of our separate histories, and I thought that he might once have sensed that kinship, that he'd had some diffuse knowledge of the choices I confronted, and had designed the story of Firebase Ruby for my benefit, shaping it as a cautionary tale—one I'd failed to heed. But perhaps I'd read too much into what was sheer coincidence. I touched his hand, and his breath caught, then shuddered forth, heavy as a sob. All that remained for him were a few stories, a few hours in the light. I tried to think of something I could do to ease his last days, but I knew death was the only mercy that could mend him.

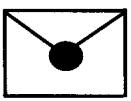
Mei invited Tan and me to spend the night in the trailer—for old times' sake, she said—and we were of no mind to refuse. We both yearned for those old times, despite neither of us believing that we could recapture them. Watching Tan prepare for bed, it seemed to me that she had grown too vivid for the drab surroundings, her beauty become too cultivated and too lush. But when she slipped in beside me, when we began to make love on that creaky bunk, the years fell away and she felt like a girl in my arms, tremulous and new to such customs, and I was newly awakened to her charms. She drifted off to sleep afterward with her head on my chest, and as I lay

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

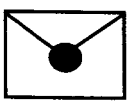
there trying to quiet my breath so not to wake her, it came to me that future and past were joined in the darkness that enclosed us, two black rivers flowing together, and I understood that while the circus would go its own way in the morning and we would go ours, those rivers, too, were forever joined—we shared a confluence and a wandering course, and a moment proof against the world's denial, and we would always be a troupe, Kim and Kai, Mei and Tranh, Tan and I, and the major . . . that living ghost who, like myself, was the figment of a tragic past he never knew, or—if, indeed, he knew it—with which he could never come to terms. It was a bond that could not save us, from either our enemies or ourselves, but it held out a hope of simple glory, a promise truer than Heaven. Illusory or not, all our wars would continue until their cause was long-forgotten under the banner of Radiant Green Star. O

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:



ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
P.O. Box 54033, Boulder, CO
80322-4033



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dying live on CNN

not the first man
or woman to
die in space but the first
one to go with the whole
world listening agonizing while his air
grew stale he'd been working outside
for three hours before the explosion
that set him adrift and
kept the ship from following him

two hours of oxygen left
half of that spent in quiet
urgent talk while they tried to
shoot a lifeline out it went
straight and true but too short

then his goodbyes and attempts at
eloquence then panic and panting
and wheezes fainter and fainter
inaudible last words

with a burst of strength he
cracked the seal on his helmet

—Joe Haldeman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Twisted Kicks

As I write these words, Richard Calder has no US publisher, and that strikes me as a crying shame. One of the sassiest, most uniquely talented writers of SF to appear in many a year, Calder deserves to reach as wide an audience as possible. Not only would individual readers of some sophistication and openness delight in his work, but the field as a whole would benefit from broad-spectrum exposure to Calderian memes.

You can reread Norman Spinrad's paean to Calder in the October/November 1999 issue of this magazine. The topic at the time was Calder's *Frenzetta* (1998), which I myself recently caught up with. As Spinrad claimed, *Frenzetta* represented a successful pushing-forward of Calder's signature themes and tropes: the linkage twixt death and sex; the soul's longing for Arcadian pastures of elysian bliss; society's imposition of hateful/desirable convolutions onto simple desires. Moreover, Calder's language, without losing one whit of its begemmed Nabokovian exactitude, became focused more searingly on faithful pictorial preciseness and narratological plentitude—fittingly so, for an author who, like Ballard, claims as much influence from visual artists as from prosodists.

Calder's latest marketplace-banned-in-the-USA miracle is *The Twist* (Earthlight, mass-market, £5.99, 282 pages, ISBN 0-671-03719-6), and as might be expected, he plows new ground here as well. Think Robert Coover crossed with Jack Womack, Lucius Shepard, and film director Jim Jarmusch, and you have the faintest inkling of Calder's distinctive accomplishment with this book.

In the American West (but what era America? At times, the Eisenhowerian fifties seem to reign, at others a Victorian sensibility, producing a stimulating deracinative effect), an invasion from Venus has transmogrified part of the country into a twilight zone. A weird "psychogeography" with its own physical laws is in effect, rendering an amorphous swath of land from Colorado to California into a corridor millions of miles long that connects physically to the planet Venus itself. One other "twist": Venus is literally the afterworld, and its inhabitants are death-driven psychopomps who are assigned on a one-to-one basis to humans, whose souls, upon the body's dissolution, will end up on Venus as they eternally have.

Our focus is John Twist, desperado and gunfighter, and his lady death, Viva Venera, a Venusian accompanying him in expectation of shepherding his soul back to Venus upon Twist's inevitable bloody end. As a star-crossed pair, a metaphysical Bonnie and Clyde, these two are plainly the latest in the long line of Calderian lovers, such as Duane the zombie and Frenzetta the ratgirl. But rather than inhabit these characters from the pullulating inside as he has always done in the past, Calder imposes yet another "twist" (there is a constant playful use of this word in this book, explicitly and implicitly): he makes our narrator a young rebellious girl, Nicola E. New-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ton, who becomes enamored of the glamorous pair and casts her fate with theirs. The trio's adventures through the eerie interzone, culminating in John Twist's inevitable fatal passage to Venus, form a kind of decadent version of Charles Portis's *True Grit* (1968), through which Nicky's voice resounds as a kind of Holden-Caulfieldish vigorous and amusing whine.

Calder has never been funnier than in this book. From his outrageous extended metaphors ("I gripped the sides of my chair, my stomach ascending into my mouth and then, slamming into reverse, plummeting through the bottom of my abdomen, bifurcating to shoot down my legs and explode, like a dynamited haggis, at my feet."), to the way he undercuts Wild-West and SF clichés, Calder is unrelentingly wry and absurd, rather as if A.E. van Vogt and Ronald Firbank had collaborated.

If I had to pick a single author to match Calder's effect, I'd choose Michael Moorcock. Like Moorcock, Calder is at ease cutting and restitching the gladrags of pop culture, highlighting the fruitful contradictions and disturbing conjunctions of his patchwork creation. And if not for Jerry Cornelius blazing the way, no John Twist.

Any reader even a little weary of rationalist SF that tries to polish up the cosmically ineffable into shiny Hugo Awards owes it to themselves to clamor for more of Calder, before his next book, *Malignos*, hits those fortunate foreign shelves.

The Lady's Not for Burning

I well recall my first pleasurable encounter with the work of Tanith Lee at the start of her career, some twenty-five years ago. Reading *The Birthgrave* (1975) was a sensual and gaudy experience, and it was apparent even then that Lee had her own unique worldview that would continue to translate awesomely well into metaphorically black and scarlet mystical adventures. (Parenthetically speaking, the role of DAW Books in debuting both Lee and C.J. Cherryh is a historical development with many ramifications for our contemporary field that has been accorded too little discussion.)

Despite her strong track record and undeniable talent, however, Lee —like Calder—has had her share of troubles lately while trying to reach a US market. Her new publisher is the aptly yet ironically named Overlook Press (Lewis Hollow Road, Woodstock, NY 12498), and they deserve full credit for allowing Lee to initiate a new quartet of fantasies revolving around "the phases of alchemy and the four elements." Two books—both with eye-searing J.K. Potter covers—have so far been issued.

The first volume, *Faces Under Water* (1998) introduced us to Lee's otherworldly city known as Venus or Venera, a watery haunted place based on our familiar Venice, featuring many analogous names and institutions and a parallel history. It is this common setting that will apparently link the books, for no characters repeat from first to second.

Faces belongs to that tiniest of fantasy subgenres, tales of an alternate Renaissance, such as Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *Ariosto* (1980) and Paul McAuley's *Pasquale's Angel* (1994). Our young impetuous Byronic hero, Furian Furiano, clashes inadvertently with the Maskmakers Guild and their plans for supernatural world domination. Falling in love with the mysterious Eurydiche, victim of a strange congenital aberration, Furian eventually passes through dangerous Eleusinian rites of passage and comes close to death,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rescued at the final moment only by his lover and by his elderly friend, the eccentric Doctor Shaachen. Lee's writing here has an antique moral heft and gothic beauty that is closer to E.R. Eddison's and to Nathaniel Hawthorne's brand of fantasy (think "Rappaccini's Daughter" for the latter) than to any modern vein (although the film *Chinatown* [1974] might also be profitably drawn into the discussion) and she succeeds admirably in creating a delicious sense of cognitive estrangement.

The second installment in this series, *Saint Fire* (hardcover, $25.95, 335 pages, ISBN 0-87951-735-2) vaults back into the religion-shaded past of the Serene City. (Only internal clues tell us this, though; for instance, the Bridge of Lies under which Furian often passes has yet to be named during this era.) Modeling her story partially on the life of Joan of Arc, Lee will introduce many idiosyncratic facets to her tale.

The somewhat simple-minded slavegirl named Volpa appears doomed to a life of lowly misery—until the moment when her master attempts to rape her and, employing pagan wild talents, she catalyzes a conflagration from which she emerges unharmed. In danger of being branded a witch (Venera is currently under the thumb of inquisitorial priests), Volpa is saved by a powerful Magister of the Church named Fra Danielus. Secretly something of a pagan libertine himself, Danielus rechristens the girl Beatifica and begins her education and grooming, intent on using her as a secret weapon to liberate the citizenry from their oppressors. Along with his protégé, a holy knight named Cristiano, Danielus comes to discover that Beatifica is a deeper reservoir of mystery than he ever imagined. Although originally complacent about being manipulated, her own character and quirky willfulness ultimately shine through, during a moment of trial that recalls Furian's earlier testing.

The atmosphere Lee conjures up in this book is closer to that of a Breughel painting than to any Renaissance artwork. A rough lively peasantry, hard living conditions, darkness and evil lurking just beyond the glow of the hearth. We are firmly back in the medieval conditions that gave rise to the cruelly potent fairy tales collected by Grimm, and Lee unrelentingly confronts and depicts the reign of ignorance already half-forgotten in the first book. Lacking also is the modernist air of sexual freedom and experimentation present in *Faces*. Even when Cristiano and Beatifica fall in love and ultimately get a chance to consummate their relationship physically, sanctity pervades.

What might be construed as the real climax of this book occurs one hundred pages prior to the end, and Lee spends the remainder of her narrative leisurely weaving the tapestry of the aftermath. I'd have shaped the proportions a bit differently, but Lee certainly presents enough material in the last third of the book to hold your attention.

Earth and Air await: we can count on Tanith Lee to turn those elements into gold as well.

Hothouse Scandals

Do you know Paul Krassner? Ur-Yippie, nothing-sacred satirist, occasional porn-industry editor and memoirist? Ran a pig named Pigasus for president, tried to levitate the Pentagon, continued to publish his scathing broadside *The Realist* right up to century's end? Surely a positive and large-looming force for regenerative chaos on our recent cultural landscape.

Norman Spinrad is SF's own Paul

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Krassner, a Cosmic Trickster intent on rubbing our noses into our own hypocrisy, indifference, and heedless self-indulgence. He functions perpetually at a single level marked "full-throttle, balls-out," and his fictions more closely resemble Uzi-blazing ambushes on all our sins than pretty Aristotelian esthetic exercises.

Spinrad's latest, *Greenhouse Summer* (Tor, hardcover, $24.95, 317 pages, ISBN 0-312-86799-9), hews faithfully to this model. At some indefinite twenty-first-century date, Earth swelters in its own climatological juices: desertification, coastal inundation, tropicalization. Mankind has adapted, but in the kind of half-assed way any clear-eyed yet hopeful realist might predict. Among lesser changes, one major societal earthquake has resulted from these environmental stresses: the future is post-capitalist, the economy run by "syndics," specialized affiliations of shareholders that are almost familial or feudal.

Monique Calhoun works for the syndic called Bread & Circuses, what we might deem a PR firm, although their mandate extends to political shenanigans too. Eric Esterhazy is employed by the Bad Boys, the allied descendants of our Mafia, triads, and drug cartels. These two bigger-than-life brawlers meet head-on like converging express trains in Paris, the site of an annual UN convention to deal with a potential catastrophe called Condition Venus. Amidst all the backstage maneuverings, skullduggery, and double-dealing being run by the assorted factions, Monique and Eric will discover a conspiracy with dire global implications, and confront their own heretofore unquestioned moral codes.

Spinrad veers from gonzo satire to realpolitik bickering to soap-opera clashes to scientific speculation, changing gears whenever his muse gooses him. There's that disdain for convention and neat constructions again. But it all coheres effectively somehow, and I'm reminded of what the magnificent Neil Young said when told he sings off-key: "Hey, man, that's my style!"

Although basic differences in angle of attack and theme definitely exist between them, *Greenhouse Summer* reminds me a bit of Bruce Sterling's *Distraction* (1998): both books force us to acknowledge the titanic challenges that await us in this new century, and demand from us answers about our courage and intentions.

Big Smart Objet d'Art

George Lucas missed a sure bet when he chose to film his own Big-Dumb-Object-filled script for *The Phantom Menace* (1999) rather than open up his precious project to outside sources. He could have turned, for instance, to Sean Williams and Shane Dix, adapting their new space opera *Evergence: The Prodigal Sun* (Ace, mass-market, $6.99, 393 pages, ISBN 0-441-00672-8) into his beloved *Star Wars* mythos. He would have started with a book that is genre-savvy and capably written, full of adventure and Asimovian imperial vistas. And best of all, in the humans-only cosmos of *Evergence,* there would have been no room for Jar-Jar Binks.

Williams and Dix, two Aussie writers new to US waters, immediately jumpstart their novel (with luck, the first in a series), by postulating a long intriguing backstory. Our galaxy has been colonized, solely by humans, for over half a million years, providing a richly allusive history of empires and alliances. Despite being the only sentients, however, our species has diversified:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pristines resemble our familiar twenty-first-century somatype, while Exotics sport many mental and physical modifications. The High Humans have become numinous, following various pathways to transcendence. (Note a Vingean homage here, present also in the galaxy-spanning communications network called IDnet.)

The narrative spotlights one small sector of this vast civilization: the border between the rival Dato Bloc and the Commonwealth of Empires. Our heroine (female leads in such stefnal adventures, by the way, seem at this date to be practically *de rigueur*) is one Morgan Roche, intelligence agent for the COE. Given the task of shepherding an experimental AI called simply Box from its point of origin to COE HQ, Morgan quickly finds herself an unwitting pawn in several deadly plots. How she perseveres and finally triumphs over both her enemies and her superiors, eluding death and dishonor, forms the simple yet transfixing story arc.

Dix and Williams accomplish a lot here: they provide Morgan with a team of engaging buddies (not the least of whom is Box), from a enigmatic artificial man to a girl telepath, from a shattered mercenary to a ship-who-sang cyborg adversary. They deliver tons of action in straightforward, economical prose notable for its clarity. And they offer wide-screen baroque plotting never out of control. Oh, sure, there are inevitably a couple of logic holes in the text: for instance, the High Humans who built Box seem willing to work for anyone, so why doesn't the Dato Bloc simply commission another Box instead of trying to steal Morgan's? But new battles and challenges surface so rapidly that such crevasses of belief are easily overleaped.

With echoes of vintage Jack Williamson and Poul Anderson, as well as Niven, Asimov, and Vinge, Williams and Dix proudly continue a vital tradition, proving SF as diverse a field as ever.

Freighters of Fable

The fleet is in, and our fortunate harbor is full of exotic caravels and barques and dhows, their spiced holds full of glittering short stories of every type, hand-crafted for your enjoyment.

From Tachyon Press (PMB 139, 1459 18th Street, SF, CA 94107) comes Grandmaster A.E. van Vogt's "first story collection in twenty years," *Futures Past* (trade, $17.00, 188 pages, ISBN 1-892391-05-8). A touching introduction by Harlan Ellison celebrats just what madethe recently departed van Vogt so special. Turn to any story here—the selection spans van Vogt's career—and you find the oneiric action, philosophy made flesh, and the startlements and reversals and layered mysteries that marked van Vogt's best work. Amazingly, the occasional awkward patches of prose simply highlight the effect of otherworldliness. And to supplement this volume, turn to *The War Against the Rull* (Tor, trade, $13.95, 269 pages, ISBN 0-312-85239-8). Billed as this novel's "first complete edition," by virtue of the inclusion of 1978's "The First Rull," this book is in reality a fixup from a series of stories that ran in *Astounding* between 1940 and 1950. Its episodic nature still shows through the Bondo, but that in no wise detracts from its vitality. This glorious zigzag tale of interstellar war resembles van Vogt's own description of life: "a squamous film superimposed on an underlying matter so intricate in its delicate balancing of different energies that life itself is but a brief, vain straining against that balance."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Subterranean Press (PO Box 190106, Burton, MI 48519) presents a real find in *A Touch of the Creature* (hardcover, $40.00, 200 pages, ISBN 1-892284-45-6): over a dozen previously unpublished stories by the youthfully deceased Charles Beaumont. If you don't know Beaumont's name—his fame persists today if at all due to his scripting of nineteen classic episodes for the original *Twilight Zone*—you owe it to yourself to discover his work now. Despite their failure to sell during Beaumont's lifetime, all of these stories are winners, highly polished jewelry boxes that open to reveal squirming nests of psychological snakes. Whether operating in the fantastic or mimetic realms, Beaumont could suck the reader into his creations with the deftness of Sturgeon, Bester, or Kornbluth. And Beaumont also almost always provides a healthy catharsis. When the protagonist of "A Friend of the Family" conquers a crude and leering coworker named Pearson, the relief is palpable: "And with her lips upon his, he knew he was safe, now, from all the Pearsons in the world. He was safe from the Pearsons in his mind."

Once again, turn to Firebird Distributing (2030 First Street, Unit 5, Eureka, CA 95501) for the best in British imports. Paul Bradshaw's *Alternate Lives* (Enigmatic Press, chapbook, $10.00, 60 pages, ISSN 1464-1461) contains two disturbing novellas: "The Vanishers" and "The Lonely Ones." The former tale reminds me of Robert Aickman or Ramsey Campbell: a dreary proletarian existence comes unhinged, and apparent madness is revealed as a valid emergency exit. The second piece conjures up the spirit of Fritz Leiber, with its postulate of a class of beings who exist solely as extras in life's drama. Bradshaw's writing is at times a bit overwrought, but he succeeds fully in making you care about his characters and their fates. And Peter Crowther's *Lonesome Roads* (Razorblade Press, trade, $13.99, 145 pages, ISBN 0-9531468-1-2) is nearly flawless. Crowther's love affair with America and her folkways is on full display in these three uncanny novellas. "Forest Plains" spotlights a strange Native American drifter and his supernatural unearthing of a town's buried sins. "Standby" details the sorrows of a man bereft of his wife and willing to go to any lengths for a last contact with her from beyond the grave. And "The Space Between the Lines" concerns the kind of time-stopping device found in John MacDonald's *The Girl, the Gold Watch, & Everything* (1962), but played for horror, not laughs. Crowther's common theme in these three pieces might very well be "In the midst of life, we are in death"—yet by his compassion and ultimately hopeful nature, he affirms life's supreme value.

Originally published in 1990, Bruce Boston's droll novelette *After Magic* (chapbook, $5.95, 54 pages, ISBN 1-888993-17-0) is once more available from Dark Regions Press (PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524). This tale of two Victorian magical rivals—each half talented, half charlatan—belongs next to such immaculate cousins as Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995) and Lisa Goldstein's *Walking the Labyrinth* (1996). In such lines as "He had learned to breathe like a tree and sleep as slyly as a goldfish," the poet in Boston aligns with the storyteller to create one evocative scene after another. (For another Boston title, see below.)

Rare is the ability to produce seamless collaborative stories that read like the work of a single talented individual. Yet just this neat trick have Darrell Schweitzer and Jason

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Van Hollander managed, for an entire volume's worth of alluringly uncanny tales. *Necromancies and Netherworlds* (Wildside Press, trade, $15.00, 159 pages, ISBN 1-880448-66-1) is a wonderful collection, reflecting both Schweitzer's affectionate knowledge of literature's supernatural landmarks and Van Hollander's visual chops (the latter is known primarily as an illustrator, and provides B&W vignettes here in addition to his prose). The first five stories constitute a mini-cycle in a Clark Ashton Smith mode, depicting the turbulent times in an otherworldly milieu when gods are overthrown and evil human passions hold sway. Plenty of classy grue here. The remaining five stories range across the occult map, both literally and metaphorically. My favorite is "The Throwing Suit," which recalls Lovecraft's "Pickman's Model" in its rendition of an artist tormented by unnatural forces. With a light, easy touch, the hybrid tale-teller who might be called Darjas Van Hollweitz wins this three-legged race handily. (Wildside Press, 522 Park Avenue, Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922.)

The title of Gerard Daniel Houarner's new collection is worthy of songwriter Aimee Mann: *I Love You and There Is Nothing You Can Do About It* (Delirium Books, hardcover, $25.00, 170 pages, ISBN 1-929653-03-4). But the stories that flesh out this book (flesh bruised and broken) are hardly romantic trifles, cynical or otherwise. They are instead Grand Guignolish shockers reminiscent of John Shirley's work. Houarner's introductions show a concerned and ethical individual at work, and his sharp literary skills insure that he always adheres closely to his personal moral compass, without sacrificing horrific impact. "Our Lady of the Jars" is my favorite here, straying as it does into the Borgesian territory of imaginary beings. To arrange for your own obsessive stalker, contact Delirium Books at 7 EMS B33 Lane, Warsaw, IN 46582.

The very first book published eleven years ago by the just-founded Fedogan & Bremer (3721 Minnehaha Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406) was the collected SF of Donald Wandrei, and it sold out in twelve months. Now, in a second edition (two newfound stories and many photos have been added), *Colossus* (hardcover, $29.00, 462 pages, ISBN 1-878252-45-3) returns. I praised Wandrei's fantasy stories—assembled in *Don't Dream* (1997)—highly in these pages, and the same encomiums descend on *Colossus*. Wandrei's writing was exceptional for its era, sophisticated and individualistic, and these stories hold up remarkably well after nearly seven decades. The enthusiasms and cynicism of a young man blaze vividly, and the ideational acrobatics are exceptional. These stirring tales inhabit a part of the space-time continuum "where the world of man became a lost dream, and where eternity vied with infinity, and where the mind trembled in the presence of realities above its deepest imaginings." (From "A Race Through Time.") Recommended without reservations.

Last year our field mourned the untimely death of publisher Jim Turner, prime mover behind Golden Gryphon Press. Commemorated soon afterward by a posthumous World Fantasy Award, Turner's memory will be kept even more brightly alive by the decision of his brother, Gary, to carry on the publishing business, with the capable assistance of the indefatigable and well-read Marty Halpern. Two recent offerings from Golden Gryphon (3002 Perkins Road, Urbana, IL 61802) were initiated by Jim Turner

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and brought to completion by his brother. Newer releases will more fully reflect the changed editorship while continuing the Golden Gryphon tradition of presenting impressively comprehensive single-author tributes.

Readers of this magazine over the past few years will certainly have noted Tony Daniel's quietly dramatic stories, nine of which make it into *The Robot's Twilight Companion* (Golden Gryphon, hardcover, $24.95, 325 pages, ISBN 09655901-5-1). But nothing beats reading them back-to-back, where their many virtues synergize. Daniel reminds me of the young George R.R. Martin in his ability effectively to blend emotion and speculation (only once, in "Life on the Moon," falling into bathos). But he can also pull out the metaphysical stops, in such entries as "Mystery Box" and "Grist," achieving hard-edged effects similar to those attained by Simon Ings. Presenting us with a crowd of vivid characters, Daniel proves himself a masterful fantasist.

Forty years into his career, Neal Barrett, Jr., the Texas Tornado, should be a name shouted from the housetops, rather than one of SF's quiet secret weapons, and maybe his collection *Perpetuity Blues* (Golden Gryphon, hardcover, $21.95, 247 pages, ISBN 09655901-4-3) will earn him some well-deserved acclaim. Utterly unique, yet sounding at times like a Southern-fried James Blaylock, Barrett populates his world with common folks facing uncommon disasters, triumphs and adventures. His prose bristling with more funny lines than a toad boasts warts, Barrett is simultaneously engaged and aloof, a wry observer of human foibles, yet admittedly and sympathetically gutter-dwelling himself. My favorite story here, "Stairs," is atypical in its sundering from our familiar world, yet it illustrates the choices facing the individual in society better than many a novel. Barrett belongs in your library and in your heart.

Counting Crows

I'm a fan of scientist biographies and autobiographies. Historical information and rationalist perspectives of keen interest to any SF reader can often be found in such volumes, as well as fascinating speculations. Not to mention the sheer delights of sharing a unique and talented individual's memories. And although *There is a World Elsewhere* (Riverhead, trade, $12.95, 209 pages, ISBN 1-57322-756-0) by F. González-Crussi focuses almost exclusively on the domain of pure memory, the result is still so captivating that you will be well repaid for your reading time. González-Crussi belongs to that exclusive company of literary MDs, whose most famous members are Richard Selzer and Lewis Thomas. Author of *Notes of an Anatomist* (1985), González-Crussi has mastered a Vancian or Cabellian prose style, which translates his boyhood reminiscences into a dark and exotic tapestry. From his days as a teenager working in the family pharmacy to his college years when he had occasion to witness the intense stresses of the med-student lifestyle, he coolly dissects the behavior of himself and others. Musing on the uncertainties of science and the limitations of medicine, he generously shares with us the seed and soil that produced the current mature, sensitive, and intelligent artist-doctor.

From Feral House (PMB 359, 2532 Lincoln Boulevard, Venice, CA 90291) comes a mind-blowing volume that chronicles the obscure intersection of occultism, SF fandom,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the early days of rocketry. *Sex and Rockets* (hardcover, $24.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-922915-56-3), subtitled "The Occult World of Jack Parsons," is a pseudonymously written book (the author, "John Carter," is alleged to be closely involved in contemporary rocketry circles, and thus somewhat wary of publicity) that serves as a full-fledged, well-researched biography of its subject, as well as a window onto a weird vanished bohemian milieu. Parsons (1914-1952) was a self-taught explosives engineer and chemist instrumental in the founding of the modern Jet Propulsion Laboratories. At the same time, he was an avid SF reader and a proactive disciple of Ultrabeast Aleister Crowley. Into Parsons's orbit drifted Heinlein, van Vogt, and L. Ron Hubbard, as well as dozens of other fascinating California boho types. Blending black magic, libertinism, and nitroglycerin, Parsons danced along a cosmic razorblade until his death in an accidental (?) explosion. Author Carter delivers all the hard facts, as well as a wry point of view. Utterly fascinating, and highly recommended.

I was astonished to find a neighborhood of my hometown, Providence, indexed in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (Harcourt Brace, hardcover, $40.00, 755 pages, ISBN 0-15-100541-9), but there it was: the district of Federal Hill, earning an entry for its centrality in Lovecraft's "Haunter of the Dark." Such are the catholic and invigorating tastes of compilers Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, who admirably see no problem with letting "real" yet story-ensorcelled locales consort with purely imaginary ones. In this rich and endlessly fascinating encyclopedia you'll visit not only familiar wonderlands from the works of such famous authors as Cabell, Eddison, Tolkien, Le Guin, Eco, and Carl Sandburg, but also lesser-known precincts such as Mezzorania, a kingdom in the eastern deserts of Africa, and Roadtown, a horizontal city in New York. Because the authors are Europeans with tremendous knowledge of both modern and classical literature, they spread their nets wide, bagging everyone from Aristophanes to J.K. Rowling. Handsome illustrations and maps by Graham Greenfield, Eric Beddows, and James Cook round out this truly exceptional Baedeker for the Lands of Heart's Desire.

One of the earliest posthumous publications from J.R.R. Tolkien was 1976's *The Father Christmas Letters*, featuring reproductions of Papa Tolkien's North Polar holiday missives to his children. Those who missed this earlier charming volume can now avail themselves of its updated and expanded edition, *Letters from Father Christmas* (Houghton Mifflin, hardcover, $20.00, 156 pages, ISBN 0-618-00937-X). Over two decades' worth of sprightly illustrated correspondence from doting father to his lucky children is here attractively and intelligently laid out in vibrant color. We can witness Tolkien's unquenchable mythos-making powers at play even in such a rushed and left-handed medium, as he relates the misadventures that befall poor Father Christmas and his odd helpers. Tolkien's moral authority and Nordic imagination invest these simple familial pages with some of the same weight carried by his famous trilogy, and insure some fascinating reading.

Hard as it is to novelize a film, creating a version of a computer game in any alternate medium has to be even tougher, as the translator lacks pregiven characterization and other useful fictional assets. Still, perhaps a certain greater freedom also obtains. Being unfamiliar with the videogame source for the graphic novel *Alpha Centauri: The Power of*

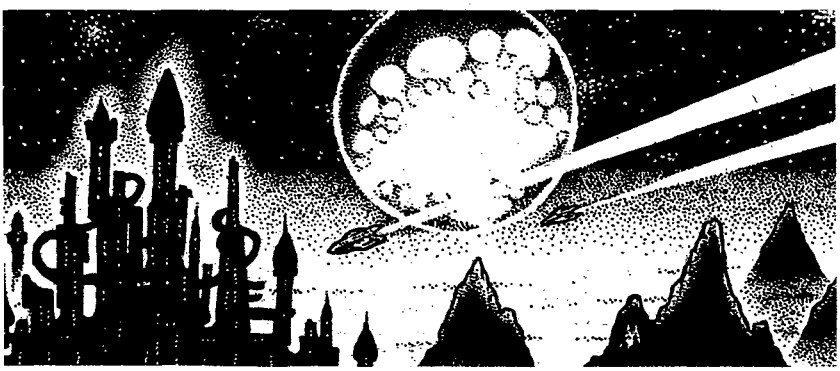
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Mind Worms (NBM, trade, $8.95, 48 pages, ISBN 1-56163-242-2), I can't report on how faithfully it hews to the original scenario or look. But I can say that artist Rafael Kayanan and writer Steve Darnall have succeeded in creating an attractive free-standing adventure in the *Planet Stories* mode. With its fuzzed-out Corben-style imagery and New Age vs. Fascism paradigm, this tale of human-alien rapprochement delivers its fair share of fire-button kicks. Contact NBM at 555 8th Avenue, Suite 1202, NY, NY 10018.

Here's a posse of speculative poets, each man orating and declaiming his own unique lays in his own unique voice. Read them all, and experience nearly the entire range of modern SF verse.

The first two chapbooks come from Anamnesis Press, PO Box 51115, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Keith Allen Daniels's *I Think, Therefore Iamb* ($6.95, 52 pages, ISBN 1-892842-12-2) offers the "silliest" poems, and I use that adjective as a compliment, in its Monty Python sense. As you might guess from its title alone, Daniels belongs to the wholesome tradition of Ogden Nash and other witty versifiers, and he is perhaps the only fellow who could use a word like "spaghettification" and get away with it. Consider Gahan Wilson as his visual equivalent. On the other hand, the tightly packed poems in David Lunde's *Nightfishing in the Great Sky River* ($7.95, 58 pages, ISBN 1-892842-14-9) remind me of Gregory Benford's prose (as perhaps the book's allusive title is intended to do). Quietly dramatic, scientifically ruminative, Lunde's poems are meditations suitable for early mornings beneath naked stars. Picture Chesley Bonestell as his pictorial analogue.

John Noto's *Simulcast Yearning* (Wordcraft, trade, $9.00, 84 pages, ISBN 1-877655-32-5) traverses a nightmare landscape more cyberpunkish or Burroughsian and surreal than any of his compatriots care to inhabit. A poem such as "Disruptor" reads almost like a lost William Gibson story, and Noto's urban, dead-tech milieu where bodies melt into plasteel offers harsh visions of deracinated narrators still valiantly searching for meaning and release. Tap Rick Berry to limn these dreams. (Wordcraft, PO Box 3235, La Grande, OR 97850). Finally, from Miniature Sun Press (PO Box 11002, Napa, CA 94581) comes a foldout broadside featuring a single long poem by Bruce Boston: *Lesions of Genetic Sin* ($4.00, ISBN 0-9676666-0-0). Only J.K. Potter could do justice to this harrowing saga of love's tortures and the body's infidelities, so typical of Boston's awesome talents. O



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Something for everyone this month—and don't forget the Chicago 2000 Worldcon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs and on how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

JUNE 2000

16-18—**DucKon.** For info, write: **Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60189.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) **duckon.org.** Con will be held in: Arlington Heights (Chicago) IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton (becoming Sheraton). Guests will include: Mad Scientist Guy Consolmagno, S. J., musicians M. & C. Porath.

16-18—**ConJuration. (573) 449-0051 (hotel).** (E-mail) **conjure@gte.net.** Ramada, Columbia MO. C. Q. Yarbro, Erin McKee.

16-18—**ConTerpoint. (703) 221-1181 (hotel).** (E-mail) **steveb@radix.net.** Ramada, Quantico VA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

16-18—**TriCon. (509) 627-1303.** (E-mail) **d.carson@owt.com.** Tri-cities (SE) WA. Dirk Benedict (Battlestar Galactica).

16-18—**Anime North.** (E-mail) **info@animenorth.com.** (Web) **animenorth.com.** Ramada Airport East, Toronto ON.

16-18—**ConFuse.** (E-mail) **confuse@lysator.liu.se.** (Web) **lysator.liu.se/confuse.** At Ryds Herrgård, in Linköping Sweden.

17-18—**Nocturnal.** (E-mail) **midgaard@demon.co.uk.** Radisson Edwardian Heathrow, London UK. J. Marsters. Horror.

18-July 28—**Clarion West. (206) 322-9083.** (E-mail) **kfishler@fishler.com.** Seattle WA. Writers' workshop. Tuition $1400.

22-25—**MidWestCon.** (E-mail) **scottst@ix.netcom.com.** (Web) **cfg.org/midwestcon.** Cincinnati OH. Low-key relax-a-con.

23-25—**AgamemCon. (949) 643-8352.** (E-mail) **orrock@ix.netcom.com.** Hilton, Burbank CA. Space: Above & Beyond.

24-25—**Trek Expo. (918) 838-3388.** (E-mail) **thornton21@aol.com.** Expo Center, Tulsa OK. J. Hertzler. Commercial show.

28-July 2—**SFRA, Joe Sanders, English, 7700 Clocktower, Kirtland OH 44094. (440) 953-7215.** Cleveland OH. Academic.

30-July 2—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (770) 909-0115.** (E-mail) **edkramer@aol.com.** Comics, gaming & SF.

30-July 2—**AnthroCon, Box 270, Devault PA 19432.** (Web) **anthrocon.org.** Hilton, Valley Forge PA. P. Kidd. Fur & fun.

30-July 2—**Anime Expo, 530 Showers Dr. #7287, Mt. View CA 94040.** (E-mail) **info@anime-expo.org.** Disney, Anaheim CA.

30-July 2—**Aliens Stole My Handbag, Lancaster, 16 Dulverton Rd., Ruslip Man. HA4 9AD, UK.** Moat House, Shepperton

30-July 4—**Costume College, Box 3052, Santa Fe Springs CA 90670. (626) 449-0665.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA. Costuming.

JULY 2000

1-2—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Roswell NM. Commercial show.

1-4—**WesterCon, 42 Aekai Pl., Honolulu HI 96761.** (E-mail) **tropo@maui.net.** Sheraton Waikiki. Simmons, Ctein, Lorentz.

6-12—**American Library Assn.** (E-mail) **conff@ala.org.** (Web) **ala.org/.** Chicago IL For book professionals.

7-9—**ConVergence, Box 13202, Dinkytown Stn., Minneapolis MN 55414. (612) 996-9224.** Radisson, St. Paul MN. Gaiman

7-9—**CastleCon, 1607 Thomas Rd., Friendly MD 20744. (301) 292-5231.** Hilton, Gaithersburg MD. Friends and fun.

7-9—**Shore Leave, Box 6809, Towson MD 21285. (410) 496-4456.** (Web) **shore-leave.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Trek.

7-9—**A Distant Shore, Box 1851, Studio City CA 91614. (818) 761-9359.** Hilton, Burbank CA. TV's Beauty and the Beast.

7-9—**New PacifiCon, Box 1206, Taylor MI 48180.** (E-mail) **newpacificon@egroups.com.** Los Angeles CA. The TV show.

7-9—**Nexus, 280 Southmead Rd., Westbury BS10 9EN, UK.** (E-mail) **nexus@cosham.demon.co.uk.** Jarvis Hotel. Trek.

AUGUST 2000

31-Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** (E-mail) **chi2000@chicon.org.** (Web) **chicon2000.org.** WorldCon.

AUGUST 2001

30-Sep. 3—**Millennium Philcon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Philadelphia PA. Bear, Dozois. WorldCon. $145.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Advertise in the World's leading science fiction magazines with our Asimov's/Analog combined classified section. Ad Rates per issue: $2.95 per word (10 word minimum), $125 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016. Direct inquires to: (212) 686-7188; Fax (212) 686-7414.

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

Bargain Books

America's *biggest* catalog selection
Great savings on recent overstocks, current books, too. **Science Fiction,** Biography, the Occult, much more.
Free Catalog 1-800-677-3483
www.erhbooks.com/bdh

PLANET MOVERS INC., SF satire by James Allen Starkloff. Send $15 U.S. to: Broken Pen Pub., P.O. Box 11, Fort Myers Beach, FL 33931. http://starkloff.com

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK ONLINE, Third Millennium Publishing, a cooperative of online writers and resources, http://3mpub.com

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

ASTROGATOR'S HANDBOOK by Michael McCollum. 3,500 stars as seen from Polaris. http://www.scifi-az.com/astronomy/

SELLING COMPLETE collection of Analog 1960 to present. E-mail: RFLplus10@aol.com

COLLECTORS ITEMS

FOR SALE: Astounding collection starting 1933. Port, 943 E. Ave., B, Blythe, CA 92225.

INTERNET SERVICES

#ROOT ACCESS – Command your own server on the internet. Best rates anywhere. www.venture-1.com/servers

FREE AD OFFER IN OUR SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE COMBO

Place an ad in our next two issues and receive a third issue FREE!

Call (212) 686-7188 • FAX (212) 686-7414

CLASSIFIED ORDER FORM

_____words at $ _____ per word = $ _____x _____weeks = $_____

Card # _____ Exp. date _____

Signature _____ Phone # _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State_____ Zip_____

DELL MAGAZINES
Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE

SEPTEMBER COVER STORY

Robert Reed, one of our most frequent contributors, returns with our lead story, a pyrotechnic and dazzlingly inventive novella called "Father to the Man," the mind-blowing conclusion of the "Sister Alice" series (which has been running here intermittently since 1993, with such memorable stories as "Sister Alice," "Brother Perfect," and "Mother Death"), giving us ringside seats for an epic and hardfought battle between godlike posthuman entities of almost unimaginable power to determine which of two universes is going to live, and which is doomed to die . . . with it being still very much up in the air whether the universe that has *us* in it is going to be the one to survive! This is top-notch Modern Space Opera of staggering scope, sweep, and scale, surprising, suspenseful, and relentlessly paced. Don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Popular and prolific British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter**, who just won the Philip K. Dick Award (his second), returns to detail a tense and scary confrontation between a young girl and a very *alien* alien on a remote and hostile planet, in "Silver Ghost"; **Lois Tilton** takes us to a devastated and depopulated future America for a vivid and compelling look at those content to live their lives within "The Enclave"—and those who would risk almost anything to get *out* of it!; **Rick Wilber** travels across deep space to a distant planet where a Terran colony exists on the sufferance of some technologically superior (and rather arrogant) aliens, and where political unrest is putting that sufferance—and the continued existence of the colony itself—at risk, as conspiracies loom and even the most fundamental of loyalties come into conflict along the bumpy road "To Lechuars"; **John Alfred Taylor** offers us a hard-eyed study of exactly what money can and *can't* buy you, especially in a high-tech future, in "Tinkerbell Is Dying"; and acclaimed British satirist **David Langford**, a multiple Hugo winner, gives us an incisive and funny advance look at some of the deadly dangers that may await us just a bit further down the Information Superhighway, as he offers us the chance to consult "Comp.Basilisk FAQ"—before it's Too Late!

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes us on a tour of "Pleistocene Park"; and Peter Heck brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstand on August 8, 2000, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, at our *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in the rest of the year!

COMING SOON

our immense October/November Special Double Issue, jammed with as much good stuff as we can possibly get into it, including a new "Kzin" novella by **Larry Niven** and lots of other Cutting Edge stories by some of the Biggest Names in the business today, as well as some of the hottest new stars. This is one of the most eagerly anticipated events of the year, so make sure you don't miss out on it!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SOME PEOPLE WOULD KILL...FOR A COPY

But you don't need to! Subscribe to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine and you won't miss a single issue of all the mystery and intrigue you love. Each year you'll enjoy 10 issues of 144 pages and one double issue of 240 pages delivered directly to you door.

Act now and take advantage of this special introductory offer,

6 issues for just $9.97!

Enjoy the convenience of home delivery and save!

To order by charge card, call toll-free:

1-800-333-3311

Outside the U.S.A.: 303-678-0439

BY MAIL

Alfred Hitchcock • P.O. Box 54011
Boulder, CO 80322-4011

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside USA: Add $4 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds.
*We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

5P211

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEEP IN THE MIRROR UNIVERSE, A DEADLY BATTLE RAGES ON...

The shattering culmination of

William Shatner's epic trilogy

The latest in the New York Times bestselling series!

STAR TREK PRESERVER

WILLIAM SHATNER

At long last—the extraordinary final volume in William Shatner's bestselling *Mirror Universe* trilogy finds Captain James T. Kirk on the verge of surrendering to his greatest foe: himself.

Available wherever hardcover books are sold.

™, ®, & © 2000 Paramount Pictures. All rights reserved. STAR TREK and Related Marks are trademarks of Paramount Pictures. Pocket Books Authorized User.

POCKET BOOKS

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM SIMON & SCHUSTER AUDIO

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED